

Jonah: Crying Out from the Depths

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Good morning. My name, for those of you who don't know me, is Eric. I'm the youth director here at Watermark Church. I'm really excited to get to share with you guys today. I want to start out by telling you a story.

A story about a time a year and a half ago, when I had a motorcycle crash. Now, if you haven't heard this story before, don't feel sorry for me. It was me being stupid that caused the accident. My friends and I were on vacation in the Philippines. I'd driven a motorcycle before, and we thought, hey, it'd be fun to rent motorcycles and go for a ride. So we rented some motorcycles, we went for a drive.

It was beautiful, blue skies, clean air, mountains on the horizon, getting closer and closer and closer. And then I took a turn too wide, tried to stop, but hit the gravel on the side and spilled. And now, for those of you who have never been in a motorcycle accident before, here's what I want you to know. The time when your motorcycle is going down is one of the most terrifying moments in your life ever.

[1 : 03] Because in this exact moment, you realize, there is absolutely nothing I can do to save myself. There's no amount of exercise that I can do, no amount of dieting, no amount of studying in school to help myself right now.

Nothing I've ever done in my life up to this moment is going to help me survive when the bike lands on the ground. And as you're thinking these thoughts, you also have your life flash before your eyes.

And you think of all the significant relationships in your life, and you're like, oh, if I could talk to that person one more time, what would I say differently? And it flashes through your head for like 10 different people.

And you're trying to make split-second decisions about how you want to land the bike to try and minimize the pain when you hit the ground. And magically, time warps so that all of this stuff flies through your head in about two seconds.

And in those two seconds, you recognize your absolute, utter dependence on God for survival in a way that you probably have never realized it before in your life. And the reason I tell this story is because we've been talking about Jonah the past couple weeks.

[2 : 12] And today we pick up Jonah's story at a point where he recognizes his absolute need for God in order to survive. If you haven't been here the past couple weeks, I'm going to do a brief recap.

If you want more in-depth about the story up to this point, you can listen to the podcast on our website from Graham and Althea's sermons the past two weeks. But basically, Jonah is a prophet. And we said that the story of Jonah is actually a story about a great God who shows great grace. And this great God reaches out to Jonah and he says, I want you to take a message to this great city called Nineveh.

This city is wicked. This city is bloodthirsty. This city is going to be destroyed in 40 days unless they change their ways. And Jonah says, uh-uh, I'm not going to do it.

And he runs away from God. He says, get me as far away from Nineveh as possible. He gets on a boat sailing in the opposite direction. He goes on board, starts taking a nap, and a storm hits the boat.

[3 : 18] Huge waves are coming so that the men on the boat are terrified for their lives. And they come and they wake him up and they say, pray to your God, Jonah. We don't know if he has any power to do anything, but pray to him.

The men on the boat start trying to figure out whose fault the storm is, who caused this storm. And they figure out that it's Jonah. When they ask him, why is this your fault? He says, oh, you know, my God, he's in charge of the heavens and the sea, and I'm running away from him.

And they say, okay, what do we have to do to you to make this storm go away? Because we don't want to die because of you. And now I think at this point God was giving Jonah a second chance to obey.

I think Jonah could have said, turn the boat towards Nineveh. I've got to go there. But instead he said, I would rather die than obey. Throw me overboard. And so they throw him overboard. And that's where we left off the story last week. They throw him overboard. The storm calms down. And these men recognize Jonah's God is powerful. And they fear the Lord. And they make sacrifices to him.

[4 : 21] And then we just sort of left Jonah in the ocean. And today we're going to pick up the story right there and continue on. And what I want us to see today is that when God's children cry out to him from their distress, that he hears them and answers them for the sake of his glory.

The first thing that I want us to see is that when Jonah prays to God, God hears and answers. Now, growing up in the church, I heard the story of Jonah over and over and over again. And I had this picture in my head of how the story played out from this point. That Jonah sort of gets thrown overboard.

Ah! And like the moment that the first part of his body touched the sea, the sea instantly went calm. And he splashed into the water and then he was just sort of floating there. And yeah, the land was probably pretty far away, but he was in no immediate danger.

Just sort of floating there. And maybe the men on the boat were like, swim that way to the land. And he was like, oh, okay, it's going to be a long swim, but I can do it. And he starts paddling along. And as he's in this place, a huge fish comes out of the water and swallows him up.

[5 : 39] And he's like, oh no, now I'm in trouble. And he starts praying to God, God save me. And he travels down the digestive system of this fish and gets to the stomach, which is this miraculously huge stomach that's like the size of my bedroom, which is not miraculously huge for a bedroom, but which would be miraculously huge for a stomach, where he has this incredible, you know, prayer session with God.

And he's dancing around in the fish's belly. And you know, it's like the VeggieTales movie. Did anyone see that? That was like my picture of what happens to Jonah from this point.

But as I read the text, I realized that's not how the story happens from this point. Yes, Jonah gets thrown overboard and the sea calms down when he gets in the water, but it's not instant. Because as we look at Jonah's prayer, we see that the waves crashed on top of him.

These huge waves that were threatening to down the boat, smashed on top of an individual who was just in the water. Maybe he could swim, maybe he couldn't.

But even if he could, his ability to swim was no match for the waves that were crashing in over him, pushing him down, down, down into the depths of the ocean.

[6 : 57] And he sunk deeper and deeper and deeper to the floor of the ocean. He couldn't breathe anything. If he tried to breathe anything in, he would swallow gulps of salt water.

He reached the bottom of the ocean and he realized, I have no chance of survival. And at that moment, he cried out to God, God save me!

And he probably blacked out from a lack of oxygen. God sends a fish that swallows Jonah. And the fish, rather than being the danger that Jonah needs to be saved from, the fish is actually the path of salvation for Jonah.

Because he was on the verge of drowning. Jonah wakes up inside the fish and it's pitch black. And his first thought was probably, I'm dead. This is what death is like.

Smells really bad. Dark. Pretty wet. But eventually he would have realized, I'm not dead. God has saved me.

[8 : 03] And there was one writer, he wrote up an account of what it may have been like inside the fish. And I just want to read this to you, so that we can get a picture of what life would be like inside the fish.

Pitch black. Sloshing gastric juices wash over you. Burning skin, eyes, throat, nostrils. Oxygen is scarce, and each frantic gulp of air is saturated with salt water.

The rancid smell of digested food causes you to throw up repeatedly until you only have dry heaves left. Everything you touch has the slimy feel of the mucous membrane that lines the stomach. You feel claustrophobic. With every turn and dive of the great fish, you slip and slide in the cesspool of digestive fluid. There are no footholds, no blankets to keep you warm from the cold, clammy depths of the sea.

Jonah awoke to find himself in this miserable condition. And when he awoke, he began to pray. But unlike what we would expect, his prayer is not, God save me from this.

[9 : 12] His prayer is, God, thank you for saving me. He says, I was on the verge of death and I cried out to you and you heard me. You answered me.

You saved me. And yeah, this place that I'm in right now is pretty miserable, but I'm alive because God heard me and God answers my prayers. And what I want us to see is that God hears us and answers our prayers.

When God's children cry out to him, he hears us. He hears each of our individual specific prayers and cares about them. God's not limited by things like cell phone range.

Jonah was in the middle of the ocean. Not just in the middle of the ocean, but under the middle of the ocean. And God heard his prayer. God's not limited by things like our ability to communicate.

If Jonah yelled out his prayer, it probably sounded like, Blub, blub, blub. But God heard. God understood. It may have been that Jonah just mentally acknowledged, God, I need you.

[10 : 14] Save me. But even that was enough for God to hear, to understand, to care, and to respond. God's not limited in our ability to communicate or our location as to whether he can answer our prayers.

The thing that keeps God from answering our prayers is our unwillingness to offer our prayers to him in the first place. God hears.

God cares. God loves us. And God answers. So for us, maybe we're in danger of losing our job. When we pray to God, he hears, he cares, he answers.

Maybe we don't know where we're going to live next month, and we are stressed and anxious about having a place for our family to stay. When we pray, God hears, he cares, he loves us, he answers. Maybe we're parents and our kids are, we just don't know what's happening to them. We don't know where they're going in life, but we don't think it's a good place. And we cry out to God, he hears, he cares, he loves, he answers.

[11 : 21] And he doesn't just hear and answer prayers, he hears and answers our prayers. But as we can see from Jonah, he doesn't always answer them necessarily the way that we would want or expect him to.

And that's because when God answers prayers, he doesn't do it for the sake of our convenience or ease. He has a bigger plan in place. You know, if God's primary purpose in saving Jonah was Jonah's comfort and ease, there are lots of other ways that he could have saved Jonah.

He could have sent along Free Willy, and Free Willy could have scooped up Jonah and swam him nice to shore on his back, dropped him off on the shore, and Jonah's safe. And Willy is free, yes. God could have magically made it so that the storm just pushed Jonah to the shore, and Jonah was safe. But that's not how God saved Jonah, because God's primary concern with Jonah was not Jonah's comfort and ease, but something else in Jonah's life.

God wanted Jonah to see that Jonah needed God's salvation just as much as the pagans that Jonah was sent to reach. God wanted Jonah to have time to reflect on the fact that he needed God desperately, continually, every single moment of every single day of his life.

[12 : 51] And so the path that God chose to save Jonah was one that gave Jonah lots of time to be able to focus, to be able to think, to be able to reflect on what have I done?

How has God worked in my life to save me? And I think for us, a lot of times when we pray, it's easy to see the way we want the prayer to be answered, and to lose sight of what God is actually doing in our situation if he answers us a different way than we would have hoped for.

You know, this happened with Jonah, right? If he was focused on the prayer being answered the way he wanted, there are so many things he could have complained about. Hey God, it's dark in here. Could you give me a little light?

It smells really bad. You know, there's a reason that Ikea doesn't sell scented candles that are stomach acid and dead fish scented, right?

Because it doesn't smell good. And if Jonah wanted his prayer answered the way he wanted it, he could have complained about so many things. God, I'm uncomfortable, I'm cold, I'm wet. God, there's not much air in here.

[14:04] He may have actually been fading in and out of consciousness during his time in the fish's belly because there was so little air in there. That's something he could have complained about. But as we look at his prayer in Jonah chapter 2, we don't see this complaint.

We see in verse 2 that, In verse 6, he says, In verse 7, God, my prayer came to you into your holy temple that you heard me, you answered me, you have saved me.

Yeah, my situation is not ideal right now, but God, you heard. God, you answered. And I'm going to live through this difficult time knowing that you're still God.

Knowing that you're still in charge. I think a lot of times we live our lives with this belief that life is about us. We are the center of the universe. Everything in life is created for our benefit, our joy, our comfort, our ease.

And when God answers prayer, He doesn't answer prayers to reinforce that belief in our hearts. He answers prayers to point us to something bigger, something beyond ourselves, to point us to Him.

[15:20] You know, there's a time in my life where I prayed a prayer to God, and I wanted Him to answer in a certain way, and got so frustrated when He wasn't answering the way that I wanted Him to.

It was a couple months after I had moved to Hong Kong. You know, I first moved to Hong Kong, and all of the people that I had known my entire life were gone. They were back in the States, and I was here by myself.

All of the routines that I had established throughout my life, gone. All of the clubs and activities, done. My schedule was empty. I had no friends. I had nothing to do and no one to do it with.

And at first, I expected that, because I'm in a new place, and there's this excitement of being in a new place, a new experience, new adventure, and then a few months go by, and the place stops being so new.

And still I had no friends. And still I had nothing really to do. And I started to feel lonely. And the loneliness turned into depression. And I was like, God, I don't like this feeling.

[16:26] I don't want this feeling. Please take it away. And I realized that as I prayed to God, I expected Him to answer in this certain way. I expected Him to just take those feelings that I was having and throw them out the window.

But I realized, looking back, that what I was doing there is I was trying to use God for my purposes. Because I didn't like the way that I was feeling, and I wanted God to change that.

And so I prayed to Him, God, do what I want for me. Because I worked at a church, and I didn't want the people at the church to know what I was going through. And so I said, God, please act as a shield to protect me from having to be honest with people about what's going on in my life.

And as I prayed to God, I would get frustrated, because I would have day after day, I would feel the same way. And I would be like, God, why are you not answering me? Why are you not fixing me?

And I can see now what I couldn't see then, that God actually was answering me the entire time.

That He was sending people into my life when I needed it, to be able to be there for me and support me through this time, and to help point me back to Him. But because I was so focused on wanting my prayer answered in my way, I missed it.

[17:48] I went on for months and months, thinking that God was ignoring me, and that God didn't care about my prayers. When in reality, it was just that I didn't have the perspective to see how He was working in my life.

Just like Jonah, I was living in this reality, that God was answering my prayer in a way that was not the way I would have picked, as my primary option for Him to answer it. But unlike Jonah, I didn't have the perspective to see that that's what He was doing at the time.

And just like Jonah, God answered my prayers in the way that He did, because He had a lot of lessons that I needed to learn during that time. I needed to learn to depend on Him, whether I felt like He was doing what He should be doing or not.

I had a lot of lessons I needed to learn about myself, about how I'm not as strong as I always thought I was. He needed me to learn about my need for community in my life, about how I need to be open with people, and share about my weaknesses, and not put on this front that says I'm stronger and better than I am.

And He's taught me these lessons over the past few years that I never could have learned if He had just given me the answer to my prayer that I wanted when I first asked for it. But because I didn't see what He was doing or how He was doing it, I missed that fact that He was answering me for so, so long.

[19 : 13] And my question for us today is, how often do we miss the ways that God's working in our lives because He's not working in the way we would have picked? How often do we offer up a prayer and say, God's not answering me because He's not answering in the way we would have wanted Him to answer us?

How often do we get angry and frustrated at God because we lack the perspective to understand what He's doing or why He's doing it? How often do we miss the lessons that God's trying to teach us?

Because He's not teaching us those lessons in the way that we want to learn them. When God answers prayer, it's not always about our ease and comfort.

It's not about teaching us that we are the center of the universe. It's about pointing us to something greater and bigger than ourselves. What is that something else? It's His glory.

It's His glory. God answers our prayers to point us and the world around us back to Him. To show us that He is a great God. That He does love us.

[20 : 22] That He does care. That He is powerful. With Jonah, you can see this. Jonah, he gets thrown into the ocean. He deserves to die.

But God saves him. Why? First, that Jonah can see how powerful and amazing God is and how much Jonah needs God's salvation in his own life.

But there's a bigger plan to it. God also saved Jonah so that Jonah could take that message of salvation to the city of Nineveh. And He could share with the city of Nineveh the fact that there is a God that you are under His judgment right now.

And that you deserve to be destroyed. But He loves you enough that He's giving you another chance. He loves you enough that He's telling you in advance so that you have a chance to turn back and trust in Him.

And so God saves Jonah so that Jonah can experience His great grace. God saves Jonah so that the city of Nineveh can experience His great grace.

[21 : 27] But even beyond that, God saves Jonah so that we can hear about His great grace. If God ignored Jonah's prayer and just gave him what he deserved, Jonah drowns on the bottom of the ocean.

End of story. No big deal. But because God saved Jonah, because God sent Jonah back to Nineveh, because Jonah was able to deliver this message, we today in 21st century Hong Kong get to hear about and know about God's grace through God answering this man's prayer thousands of years ago.

We get to look at the city of Nineveh and know, hey, there's nothing that we can do, no amount of badness that we can do that makes us too bad for God to love us and forgive us.

We today can look at Jonah, and we can know that there is no distance that we can run from God that's too far for Him to find us and bring us back into His love.

God saved Jonah for the sake of Jonah, for the sake of Nineveh, and for the sake of Christians throughout the years, so that we can hear about His grace and see this tangible example of it being played out in history.

[22 : 46] And the reason for that is that the story of Jonah is not just a story about a man and a fish. It's primarily a story about God that just happens to involve a man and a fish.

Let me say that again. The story of Jonah is not primarily about a man and a fish. It's primarily a story about God that happens to involve a man and a fish.

If it was just a story about a man and a fish, we could tell it to kids and be like, Obey the first time! Don't be like Jonah! And that's about all the good that the story would do for us, right? But because the story is about God, we get to learn things about God's unchanging character that happened in the past, and we can see how we can trust God today because of how He has acted in the past. We can know that He forgives because He's the same God today as He was then. We can know that He chases down rebels and shows them His unconditional love because He's the same God today who chased down Jonah the rebel back then.

We can know that He's the God who hears us when we cry out to Him because He's the same God today who answered Jonah's prayer when Jonah cried out to Him. We can know that He doesn't always answer prayers the way we would necessarily want Him to because that's what He did for Jonah.

[24 : 10] But we know that when He answers prayers in ways that we wouldn't expect, that He has a plan and a purpose behind it. That He's working maybe not for our ease and our comfort, but for our good.

Because Jonah is primarily the story about God, about God's great grace, about God's great love for a man and for a city.

And so today when we're having trials, maybe we're wondering what the future holds because we just got rejected from our dream school or fired from our dream job. Maybe we went in for some routine medical tests and the results did not come back like we expected.

And now we're in this place where we're wondering, what does this mean for my future and my family's future? We have Jonah. And we have God.

And we have the same God today who heard Jonah's prayer, who answered Jonah's prayer, who loved Jonah even though he didn't deserve it, who loved Nineveh even though they didn't deserve it.

[25 : 24] And we can turn to him and trust in him. And maybe the situation won't turn out like we want it to. Maybe it will result in discomfort. Maybe it will be difficult.

Maybe it will be difficult. Maybe it will be difficult. But we know from Jonah and Nineveh that even when we can't see it, that God hears us, that he loves us, that he answers us, and that he's working through us in our world to make his fame and glory known to everyone around us and us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your work in the life of Jonah. Thank you that when he was a rebel and was running away, that you heard his prayer, that you reached out to him and you saved him when he did not deserve it, and that you used him to go into the city of Nineveh and to save them when they did not deserve it.

We thank you that you are the same God today, that you still hear our prayers, that you still answer our prayers, that you still love us, that you still work in us and through us. And God, we pray that we would trust you today, that we would have the perspective to see that you are good, that even when we don't know why you're doing what you're doing, that we can trust that you have a plan, that you have a purpose in it, and that it will end in good.

God, we love you. Amen.