
Practical Theology

What Jonah teaches us about prayer

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God has ordained various methods of dispensing his grace (what theologians call the “means of grace”) to draw his children into deeper communion with him. Primary among these “means of grace” are God’s Word and prayer. God speaks to his people in his Word and His people speak to Him in prayer, and through these God changes us and transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ.

God not only speaks to us through his Word; he also instructs how we are to speak to Him in prayer. Jonah’s prayer is filled with clear and surprising lessons. Clear, because it is filled with Scripture and a knowledge of God, and surprising because of the situation from which he prays.

God hears your prayers from the deep (verses 1-2)

Jonah stubbornly refused to follow the Lord's call. He was filled with prejudice toward the Ninevites, he rushed in disobedience away from God, and found himself in the middle of a raging storm and was thrown into the deep (1:15). God, however, appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah expected that the belly of that great fish would be his grave (verse 2). It was from there that he cried out to God.

Oftentimes we find ourselves in circumstances as bad as Jonah, sometimes of our own making, just like Jonah. Yet, no matter where we are, we can cry out to God in our distress (verse 2). Far away from Jerusalem and the temple where God promised to dwell, Jonah knew where to find the Lord. He prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish (verse 1).

God's sovereign mercy gives us confidence in prayer (verses 3-8)

Though Jonah knew that he was in the belly of a fish because of his own rebellion, he knew also that he was there because of God's sovereignty (verse 3). These were God's sovereign chastising billows

and waves. Jonah's prayer, however, does not center only upon God's sovereign discipline, but also on God's sovereign mercy.

It was from that place of discipline that Jonah appealed to God's mercy, grace, and promise of forgiveness. In his prayer he looked again to God's holy temple (verses 4 and 7). But what direction was he facing to the temple? Jonah looked beyond the physical temple in Jerusalem to the reality signified by the temple, the true presence of God in prayer.

Jonah looked to the God who is sovereign in judgement and in mercy. Jonah knew where to look to find forgiveness (Deuteronomy 30:1-3; 2 Chronicles 7:11-16). His appeal to God's grace and mercy was not based in his past obedience or in his status as God's prophet, but only in the confidence that God is sovereign and merciful and faithful to His promise to hear the prayers and confessions of His people.

God's gracious deliverance shapes our thanksgiving (verse 9)

Jonah came to realise that the fish he once thought would be his grave was really his deliverance, and

he cried out with thanksgiving and praise (verse 9). Salvation is not found in self nor obtained by works. Jonah's prayer moved from desperate cry, to confession, to praise and thanksgiving. God heard Jonah's prayer and delivered the prophet. God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah upon the dry land (verse 10). God truly hears and answers the prayers of His people causing us to praise and worship Him.

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