

January 12, 2025

Return: He Answered Me

Jonah 2:1-10

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction... I want to start out today by telling you a story that I found interesting while preparing this week. The story goes like this, "In the late winter of 1891, the whale-ship 'Star of the East' was in the area of the Falkland Islands off the coast of South America when it sighted a sperm whale. Two boats were sent out with harpoons to catch and kill the creature. But the whale's lashing tail overturned one of the boats spilling the crew into the sea. All were finally hauled back on-board ship except for one sailor, James Bartley.

The whale was eventually killed and its body drawn aboard the ship to begin the process of stripping its valuable resources. By the next day good progress had been made in removing the layers of blubber, so a tackle was attached to its stomach to hoist it onto the deck. The sailors were startled by what appeared to be signs of life inside the stomach lining. Cutting the whale open the sailors found the missing James Bartley!

Bartley was quite insane for two weeks, but when he recovered his senses, he told what he remembered of being dragged under the water. Whilst struggling for his life he had been drawn into darkness and felt a terrible and oppressive heat. Reaching out his hand he felt slimy walls that gave slightly to his touch, but he couldn't find any exit. When it finally dawned on him what most likely had happened, he lost his senses and lapsed into a catatonic state.

During his time inside the whale Bartley's face, neck and hands were bleached deathly white by gastric juices and the texture of his skin was like parchment. He never recovered from this effect and he was left nearly blind. Bartley believed that he would have likely lived inside the whale until he starved to death, as he did not find breathing a problem."

That's a great story, isn't it? But is it true? Reports do suggest that this whole story is nothing more than an early urban legend, a whale of a tale so to speak, even though it was widely reported in all the local newspapers throughout Great Britain during that time. But whether it's true or not, we know that there has been at least one man in the world who has truly gone through such an experience and lived to tell about it and his name was Jonah! We left off last week at Ch. 1 vs. 17. [read vs. 17]

I mentioned last week that I believe this to be a historical event. The great theologian A. W. Tozer once said, "If God said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, then the whale swallowed Jonah, and we do not need a scientist to measure the gullet of the whale." This was indeed a miracle, one that God orchestrated for his purposes. It was a miracle that the fish was in exactly the right place and time, that it actually swallowed Jonah and that he survived.

So, what happens next? Well, Jonah does what any of us would do when we find ourselves in desperation and despair, he prays. I want us to focus this morning on the fact that when Jonah called out to God in the depths of his despair, God heard him and he answered. Not only does God relentlessly pursue his children, like we looked at last week,

but he also answers them when they call in their times of need. Remember, it was God that brought the storm and allowed Jonah to be thrown overboard to his otherwise certain death. But it was this same God who is also there to answer and restore his repentant servant. Today we're going to take a look at Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish and see how this truth shows itself in the midst of Jonah's distress. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God. [Read Jonah 2:1-10]

Let me remind you, again, why Jonah found himself where he did. God called him and gave him a mission to go to Nineveh, Israel's enemy, and tell them to repent for their evil had risen before the LORD. But he refused and deliberately got on a ship and went in the opposite direction. And so God sent a violent storm that threatened the lives of everyone onboard and it was discovered that Jonah's rebellion is the reason for it all. So, after initially struggling to save Jonah's life, the sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard, at his request, and the storm immediately stopped. For the sailors this was a great relief and we read in 1:16 that they made vows and sacrifices to the LORD.

But what about Jonah? What happened to him? We find the answer in Jonah's prayer that we just read.

Vs. 3 says...[Read]

And vs. 5 & 6...[Read]

These verses all give us a description of Jonah's firsthand experience of sinking to the bottom of the ocean awaiting his certain death. This is not just Jonah speaking metaphorically here, but he's giving us a detailed version of what really happened. [give examples] Which brings us back to vs. 2 and the truth that I want us all to hear today. Jonah said, "I cried out to the LORD, out of my distress and he answered me."

Notice there was no argument on Jonah's part; he doesn't protest. He doesn't say, "Hey, I don't deserve this!" He agrees completely with God's judgement that has been brought on him because of his sin. This is what it means to truly repent. Recognizing we have sinned against a Holy God, agreeing with him and what he calls sin and then turning away from it and realigning ourselves and getting back on track with the LORD.

At some point before Jonah drowns, he is swallowed by the fish. And the text tells us that Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish and the LORD answered him. God hears the prayers of his children. I know that's one of the more simple concepts of our faith, but it's true. Just like needing the gospel every day, we need to remember that God hears us each day, because we so easily forget. Scripture is full of verses indicating this truth for us:

"For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer" (1 Peter 3:12).

"When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles" (Psalm 34:17).

"In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears" (Psalm 18:6)

And our first point this morning is that this truth, that God hears and answers the cries of his people, gives us hope in the depths of despair. And we see that begin to show itself in Jonah's prayer. I'm not sure he actually knew what had happened or where he was until he was spit back up on the beach. All he knew was, somehow, he was still alive. And in the midst of all of it, not only did Jonah recognize and confess his sin, but we see in his

prayer, now hope was beginning to form too. He should have drowned and been real fish food, but instead he must have been thinking to himself: “If I’m still alive and God must be keeping me alive for a purpose.” Jonah saw God’s grace and mercy in the preservation of his life and God wasn’t finished with him. So hope began to rise.

And where does that hope point his focus? To God's holy temple in vs. 4. [Read] The temple in the Old Testament was the place where God met with his people, sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sin and lives were re-dedicated to God. Gordon Keddie, a British-American pastor and theologian said this about Jonah's reference to the temple in our passage, “The reference to the temple is the key to understanding what is going on in [Jonah’s] heart, as he prays to the LORD...looking to the temple signified for Jonah what looking to Christ as Savior means for the New Testament believer, nothing less than an accomplished redemption.”

Key phrase there, “accomplished redemption.” Where else can we put our hope, in the dark times of our deepest despair, other than in the redemption we have in Jesus. Like Jonah, we may try and runaway from the presence of God for all kinds of reasons, but when we reach the bottom, just like Jonah, we realize God has been pursuing us all along and hears our cries for help, and that brothers and sisters should give us hope.

Notice the word “yet” in vs. 4. We see it again in vs. 6. These are “hope-filled” words. Jonah is saying, “This is where I found myself, yet God brought me out.” This recognition brought him to repentance and it should do the same for us. It’s a reminder to look again to the cross, where Jesus shed his blood and laid down his life to pay the price of sin. Jesus Christ will deliver you from your deepest despair if you look to him and trust in his name.

Well, the fact that God answers Jonah is a truth that also demonstrates his grace. None of us have been swallowed by a whale and I hope that never happens. But in a spiritual sense, it’s a powerful illustration of our own inability to do anything to save ourselves. Why does it have to happen this way? Because it eliminates the idea that we can do anything to help ourselves. The Bible says that anyone apart from Christ is dead in their trespasses and sins. (Eph. 2:1) It’s as if we are in a tomb, we're alive but there is no possible way out. Remember James Bartley reaching out in the heat and darkness, feeling the slimy walls of the whale’s stomach? He realized that there is no way out. The same is true for us. No amount of wisdom, or strength, or ingenuity of our own can deliver us out of the sinful state we find ourselves.

Think of Jonah. What could he do? Jonah did the one thing that God brought him to this point for, to pray. Pray to the God who was the LORD of heaven and earth; who made the land and the sea. [Read vs. 7]

When all else failed, I remembered the LORD. It is only when we are at the end of ourselves that we will humbly look to God. We sang these words together earlier, “Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When no one but Christ could help, love lifted me.” This is God's grace. His unmerited favor. Have you known the grace of God like this? Though your sins have sunk you into the depths, grace has lifted you up and place you on solid ground?

Now that Jonah has seen God's grace demonstrated, the truth of God answering him produces compassion within him for the mission. [Read vs. 8] Now, it’s not explicitly stated here, but I wonder was Jonah thinking of Nineveh at this point? Was he coming to grips with mission that God had originally called him to? You see, when we're disobedient

to God, he doesn't just force us to do what he wants. He lovingly corrects us and steers into the right direction. He doesn't force Jonah to do anything, but through God's correction his heart begins to change towards what God had already asked him to do. Which brings us back to our overall theme, God's call to return is a call to realign with him to get us back on the right path to be used by him to accomplish his purposes.

This truth that God answers us in our distress also leads to praise. Jonah was overwhelmed at this point. He was still stuck inside the fish, but in his soul, he was as free. Why? Because he learned the lesson God wanted him to learn. If you know God's grace you are really humbled by it, awed by God. At the same time you are filled with joy. You can't help it. That's why Jonah says in vs. 9 [Read]

True praise involves not just singing but a total dedication of the heart. In the belly of the fish Jonah vowed to the Lord that he would serve him. If God saw fit to release him Jonah was determined to see those vows through, namely, he would now go to Nineveh. When we are in times of trial and despair we make all kinds of promises to God. How important it is to remember those vows when he delivers us, and to use the great mercy God shows us to encourage and spur us to love and serve him better.

But what if we fail again? What if we get it wrong and let God down? All we have to do is look at the example of Jonah. Do you know what happened later on in the story? Jonah's failures didn't stop after he had run away and was restored inside the belly of the fish. You'd think, "Surely he couldn't get it wrong a second time?" And the answer is "O, yes he could." And he did as we will see in a couple weeks when we get to ch. 4.

But even then, we see also that God's grace toward him didn't stop either. God continued to pursue him. That's the significance of those concluding words of Jonah's prayer in vs. 9, "Salvation comes from the LORD." If salvation and service were up to us, none of us would make it. But as God's grace is shown in his dealings with Jonah, so he deals with us with this same grace.

When Jonah confessed that salvation was of the LORD, not in his own hands but totally in God's hands, it was as if God said: "That's it Jonah, you've learned the lesson I had for you and now for the next stage of your journey, and we read in vs. 10, "And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."

Jonah cried out to the LORD, who had pursued him and had gone to great lengths to get him back, and the LORD answered him and brought him up from the pit and placed him back on the path to be used of God to bring an entire city to repentance. This is a reminder to us, that God is not only a God who continuously pursues his children no matter how far they stray, but he also hears their cries of distress and is there to rescue and restore us in our greatest times of need. May these truths encourage your heart today. Let's pray.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." – 2 Cor. 13:14