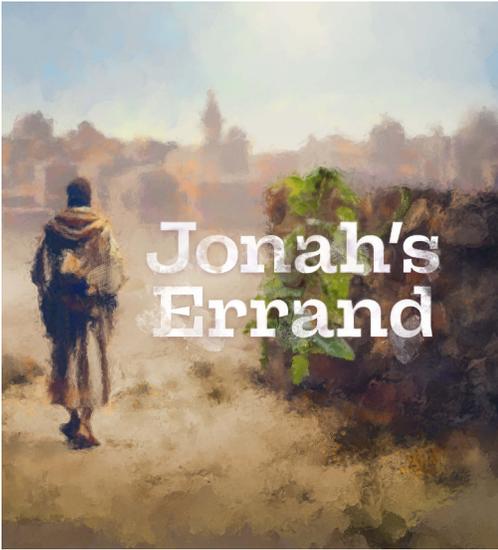




Sermon Growth Guide

April xx, 2024

Running from God



Sermon Growth Guide

April 28, 2024

Jonah's Errand - At the Bottom

Jonah 2:1-10

Key Verse: Jonah 2:6

“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.”

Big Idea: When we hit rock bottom, we only find that God is still beneath us lifting us up.

Foundations

In contrast to the narrative nature of the other three chapters of Jonah, chapter 2 consists of a personal prayer that sounds a lot like our psalms.

Tim notes in his sermon, “Nobody prays for rock bottom, but it is amazing what God does there.” We are capable people, with an inclination toward self-sufficiency. Sometimes, it is only when things are stripped away that we remember how much we’re in need of God’s presence and activity in our lives. This was certainly true of Jonah. A man who believed he could do things his way suddenly rediscovered his dependency upon the One he was disobeying.

Tim also notes, “The question isn’t, ‘Have you hit rock bottom?’ The real question is what you do there, or what God does there in you.” In this chapter, we see Jonah at his best. During the isolation of these three days, he was forced to take stock of what was going on in his life. And Jonah’s response was to cry out to God. The direction of chapter 1 was Jonah’s movement away from God. In chapter 2, we see Jonah moving toward God.

Think about it this: Jonah believed that though he had disobeyed and angered God, this same God was still patiently and lovingly present for Jonah to cry out to.

The same is true for us.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Jonah 2:1-10.

What are the different actions in these verses that Jonah declared he took?

What does it say about Jonah’s understanding of God, that he cried out to the One he had just disobeyed? What can we learn from this for our own lives?

Applying God’s Word

Jonah’s prayer quoted numerous phrases from Scripture. How well are you able to recall from memory verses from the Bible in moments when comfort, encouragement or direction are needed? In what ways can we become more adept at doing so?

Jonah expressed confidence that God could save him, despite the darkness of his circumstances. What helps you maintain hope in God’s saving activity in your life when things are hard?

Witnessing God’s Word

Jonah mentions his “shouts of grateful praise” (2:9). With whom this week can you share how you have experienced or are experiencing the goodness of God in your life?

Nobody wants to be swallowed by a whale. Nobody prays for that. Although, in the right context, it's exactly what you need. For Jonah, the only blessing in it was that it beat the alternative—drowning. He still must have wondered why this was any better. "Instead of out there, I'll just die in here." Nobody prays to be sent to rock bottom, but that is often just where we find new life. You have to get pretty deep to hit bedrock, but that is the only place where the building can begin. Sometimes the only way up is down, the only way to the summit is through the valley, before the resurrection and new life came the cross and the grave. Jonah is **At the Bottom** today. If you are at the bottom, take heart, Jesus knows the way from there.

Greg Lindsey is a friend in town who pastors Discovery Church. He and I have done a lot together with COSILoveYou. Greg just published a book called *The Rest of Your Story*. He is very open about his story. Greg was a lawyer who became a church planter in North Carolina. The church exploded. Soon he was flying off to conferences to tell stories of church growth and great success. Then he got caught in an affair. He lost his church; he lost most of his friends; he almost lost his marriage and family. It was rock bottom. That's where God met him with the rest of the story. "It took a total collapse, betraying the trust of others, deeply hurting those I love the most, embarrassing those who believed in me, and public shame and humiliation to open my eyes to the most important lessons I have ever learned in my life...At forty-one, my world grew as quiet, dark, and lonely as it had ever been. In that desert...I found the life I had been looking for as long as I could remember. In my very worst moment, God began to show me a different path." Nobody prays for rock bottom, but it is amazing what God does there.

Greg is not alone, is he? In fact, we have all, I am sure, experienced significant failures. The question isn't have you hit rock bottom. The real question is what

you do there; or what God does there in you. Tim Keller writes, "Abraham, Joseph, David, Elijah, and Peter all became powerful leaders through failure and suffering. Countless Christians can attest to the same experience. It is only when you reach the very bottom, when everything falls apart, when all your schemes and resources are broken and exhausted, that you are finally open to learning how to completely depend on God. As is often said, you never realize that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have...But it is not simply being at the bottom that begins to change Jonah but prayer at the bottom." What we have here is a powerful piece of Holy Scripture—the prayer of Jonah from the belly of a whale.

"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.'" (Jonah 2:1-2) The first thing to notice is that Jonah is praying Scriptures. He quotes about ten different Psalms and a half-dozen other verses. No, he doesn't have his Bible on his phone. He has it in his heart. What is the last time you memorized a verse, or meditated on it long enough to let it settle into your heart? You never know when you'll need it. But prayer is not meant to be complicated. Really, it is just conversation with God, talking and listening as you would with any friend. That's the intimacy of relationship Jesus won for us. You don't have to go through any careful spiritual gauntlet to get to God. Just start talking. You can pray the Scriptures when you can't find your own words, but you don't have to. Just talk to God. God is a loving Father Who loves to give His children good gifts. Crawl up into the lap of the Father and pray. He delights in you.

Ann Lamott said there are three essential prayers: Help! Thanks! And Wow! That about sums it up. Wow! is about keeping wonder in our lives and fighting off cynicism. Wow, God! Thanks!

is that attitude of gratitude. Gratitude has an outsized impact on our lives, and our mental health. But Help! may just be the purest of all the prayers. Pure and powerful. All pretense is stripped away. All confidence in other resources or schemes is gone. Either God saves or I am not saved. Like Peter on the water when he stepped out of the boat, "Lord, save me!" Like Jeremiah in the bottom of the well sinking down into the mud so deep they had to tuck clothes under his arms to crank him out with a rope. When you are that low, the only way to look is up. Lord, help! Like David, who wrote, "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." (Psalms 40:1-2) Unless the Lord saves, unless the Lord lifts me up, I am stuck. Help!

"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. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'" (Jonah 2:3-4) Jonah knows he is where he is under the hand of God. "You hurled me," he says. Could it be that God would actually press us into hard places from time to time? Could it be that God would send a difficulty or a storm? Would a loving father stop a child from continuing down a road of destruction? Jonah knows God does do such things. I still remember the looks on each of my four children's' faces when they had to get a shot at the doctor. "Ow! Utter betrayal! Did you know she was going to do that?" Jonah knows that God is a God of divine justice. He has done wrong. He is banished. But even there, he looks again to the holy temple.

"The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 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." (Jonah 2:5-6) How bad is it, Jonah? The picture here is one of utter helplessness. There is nothing he can do, and nothing anyone can do on his behalf. Only God. God is the only hope. But God is there and God is at work. "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." (Jonah 2:7) It's too late. Jonah's gone. It's too late, Jesus, the girl is already dead. It's too late, Mary, Jesus was killed and His body was stolen from the tomb. It's too late, church, the world has gone its own way and the faith is lost. Jonah says, "I remembered you." Do we forget God? "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." (Jonah 2:7)

One more movement, and it is an important one. "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 2:8-9) There are those who say that last phrase is the sum of the Gospel, the sum of all the Scriptures: "Salvation comes from the Lord," or "Salvation belongs to the Lord." Unless the Lord saves, we are not saved. Only he has the power to do it. But look at Jonah's prayer about idols. "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them." That, first of all, is a huge claim and one worth spending some time in meditation over. It is not neutral when you trust in something other than God for your hope and stay. To choose that is to deny the other, to choose one is to say no to the other, to rest your hope in a false god is to turn away from God's love.

Yes. But what is our friend Jonah doing here? He may be thinking of himself with conviction and contrition. "I see now Lord that I was putting too much trust in other things. My nation, my people, my race. Sorry. I want to trust in you alone from now on." Maybe. But do you

perhaps catch just a whiff of superiority here? “Those, They, Them...but I!” Jonah, really, from the belly of a whale? Don’t you see where you are? Can’t you smell the bile and rotting fish? This is no place to play holier-than-thou. “Those sailors cling to idols. Those Ninevites cling to idols. Not me. I keep my vows.” Spiritual transformation takes time. It takes a while for the gospel to sink in, and to truly come to an understanding of grace. We are going to see some spiritual superiority in Jonah yet, I’m afraid.

This prayer is very special to our family. In 2001, my father-in-law was out on a snorkel trip on vacation when he was pulled by a rip tide through a break in the reef and out to sea. He remembers struggling to swim toward the boat. He remembers pain in his chest and losing strength. And then he prayed. Lord, help. He woke up on the beach with no memory and no reasonable explanation for how he got there. What he saw in between the prayer and the beach is his alone to tell. He was helicoptered to San Juan, Puerto Rico, for emergency surgery and told he had suffered a major heart attack. I had a friend who is Puerto Rican whose uncle is a pastor there, and he rushed to the bedside. Together he and my mother-in-law and father-in-law explained what had happened, and that he would never again, if he ever had, doubt the reality that Jesus is his Savior and Lord. They asked me, the young pastor, what he should read and pray. I said, Jonah 2. These are the transforming moments. Nobody prays to be swallowed up. Nobody prays for rock bottom. But sometimes this is where grace sets in; this is where Jesus does some of His best work on us.

Jonah remembered God from the belly of the whale. “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” (Jonah 2:7) Why the temple? Because that’s where the price is paid. Jonah knew he was under God’s justice. He

had done wrong and he was paying the price. But he looked to the temple. In the temple is the Mercy Seat, the slab of gold over the Ark of the Covenant where the Ten Commandments are kept. Each year the High Priest would sprinkle blood from the sacrificial lamb for the forgiveness of the people’s sins. We couldn’t keep those commandments all, but God forgave because another shed blood. Jonah appealed to the temple. Jesus said, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:39-40) He is the lamb. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Because Jesus died for us, we can pray, and be forgiven, and be saved. Now Jesus is the sacrifice and you are the Temple, the very place the lost world meets God.

Are you in need? Pray. Are you in distress? Pray. Are you caught up in wonder and praise? Pray. Jonah prayed from the depths. Prayer is conversation with God, one we are charged never to forget and always to practice. Pray. Ann Lamott says, “If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, it would help to begin by admitting the three most terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little.” Help! C. S. Lewis said, “I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me.” Help! That may be the only prayer that matters, and you will find when you pray, “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Deuteronomy 33:27)