

The Thankful But Angry Prophet

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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Jonah 2:1-3, 7-10 (NRSV)

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying,

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³You 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.

⁷As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah 4:1-5 (NRSV)

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

Everyone knows something of the story of Jonah and the whale, but most know little more. But like most of us, Jonah was a very complicated man.

Jonah lies in the belly of a “great fish.” After three days and three nights,¹ he prays. What could be more natural? Even those who find prayer challenging would find it easy to pray in Jonah’s circumstances. Jonah says to God, “In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God. He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried ‘Help!’ You heard my cry.”² Jonah’s prayer is simple and direct. But there is more to it than a simple plea for God’s help. Indeed, his prayer isn’t really a plea at all. It is a statement of thanksgiving for his salvation, though Jonah still languishes in the belly of the beast. Jonah will sing God’s praises, remembering always what God had done for him. “Salvation comes from the Lord!” is the prayer on Jonah’s lips. He thanks God for what God hasn’t even yet done. Jonah seems confident that God will rescue him, perhaps because Jonah is an Israelite. Jonah won’t quite see it that way for the Gentiles in Nineveh. (There is a synopsis of the story in the page four textbox.)

¹ In the biblical reckoning, three days is not seventy-two hours, but merely one full day and portions of two

²This rendering of v.2 is from Peterson’s *The Message*. “Sheol” (v. 2 in the NRSV) is the home of the dead.

What is prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer's meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will" (Romans 8:26-27, NLT).

Let's be clear. Jonah had run away from God with about as much determination as a person could muster. When God commanded him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh,³ Jonah headed out to sea instead. When a terrible storm came, Jonah was willing to be tossed into the sea rather than call on God. Jonah didn't even turn to God when he was first swallowed up by the fish! But, in the end, after three days and nights, Jonah prayed and God answered.

Jonah stands ready to receive the outpouring of God's grace, even expects it. Later, however, Jonah is disgusted and angry when that same grace is extended to those who are not even Israelites. Jonah was ready to listen to God, so long as God behaved as Jonah thought he should. When God's way turns out to be the path of amazing grace extended to all, Jonah will have none of it.

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On to Nineveh

After being coughed up by the whale, God comes to Jonah a second time and again tells him to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's message for the Assyrians – in forty days their city would be "overthrown."

Reading Scripture is an art and often we have to be open to surprises and uncertainties about the meaning of a passage. When Jonah cries out, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be

overthrown" (in the NRSV), which we take to mean that if Nineveh doesn't repent, then it will be destroyed. Jonah is carrying God's word in this (3:3) and certainly Nineveh's destruction is on Jonah's mind . . . but is it what God has in mind? The Hebrew word translated "overthrown" in the NRSV is *hapak*, which has several meanings. It can be used to mean destruction (as in overthrown) but it is also used in the OT to refer to turning bad into good, such as mourning into joy. *Hapak* can mean "overturned" and "inverted," in addition to "overthrown." Thus, the word of God that Jonah brings to Nineveh can be read "Nineveh shall be overthrown" or, just as easily, "Nineveh shall have a change of heart." I prefer to hear this as God's surprising word of Nineveh's coming repentance. Nineveh will be turned upside down by the grace of God. Since Jonah doesn't seem to have an ear that hears "Amazing Grace," perhaps he only hears a promised destruction of Israel's enemies.

³Nineveh was the great imperial city of the hated Assyrian empire.

In any event, the most amazing thing happened. It was a much bigger miracle than Jonah surviving three days in the whale. The Ninevites heeded Jonah's message. THEY ACTUALLY REPENTED. Even the king took on sackcloth as a sign of his utter and genuine repentance. The people were to give up their "evil ways and their violence." Perhaps God would take mercy on them. And they did. And God did . . . and this made Jonah very angry.

Repentance

Repentance is an often misunderstood term. We tend to think of repentance as being sorry for something we did. But it is a much larger idea.

To repent is to turn around, to turn 180° from the direction we are heading and, instead, head toward God. To repent is to abandon our own agendas and embrace God's agenda. In their repentance, the Ninevites "turn from their evil ways and the violence that is in their hands" (4:8). For the Israelites, to repent is to turn back toward their covenant life with God. For the Ninevites, to repent is to turn toward lives of justice and mercy, toward what they know is right even though they have not been given God's law.

Repentance is a deliberate, conscious choice to begin walking in God's way. It is a long-term sustained resolve to be obedient to God's teachings as revealed to us and as written in our hearts. Jesus' invitation at the very beginning of his ministry is an invitation to "repent and believe in the Good News" (Mark 1:15). It is a call to turn back to God, to return to the covenant with God, truly loving God and neighbor.

An exclusive claim on God?

Jonah wanted to believe that the Israelites had some sort of exclusive claim on the LORD God. He wanted to put boundaries around God's grace. He wanted to believe that God could never be merciful to the hated Ninevites, but Jonah knew better, so he ran. Christians can be tempted in the same way. The question is sometimes asked this way: "Does God hear the prayers of non-Christians?" Though he didn't like it, Jonah knew that God's mercy and love have no boundaries. God will hear the prayers he chooses to hear. God will have mercy and compassion on whomever he wishes. In chapter 3, there is no hint that the Ninevites became worshipers of Yahweh; God is referred to only by the generic Hebrew term for "god," *elohim*. The focus is on the Ninevites' repentance, not upon any acknowledgement that Yahweh is the LORD God. Jonah is a cautionary tale for those of us who might want to put limits on God's grace.

You'd think that after being rescued from the belly of the whale, a single word would characterize Jonah from that day forward: grateful. Instead, he is angry with God for sparing the Ninevites. He fumes over this outpouring of repentance and forgiveness. Jonah seems blind to the grace poured out on him, and without which he'd either be lying at the bottom of the ocean or of a whale's belly.

Angry even at a plant!

The end of the story (see the synopsis of the story in the p. 4 text box) leaves us left to

conclude that Jonah is pretty much unteachable; he is even irritated with the plant. Jonah's anger seems to know no bounds. God gives him yet another chance to embrace grace, but he doesn't.

Yet . . . yet . . . Jonah is God's prophet, chosen by God to carry God's message to one of the most powerful cities in the world.

Like Jonah, we too can be tempted to think that we have a monopoly on God's grace. We are too quick to put others (insert the name of whomever you think represents the worst of humankind) outside the circle of grace, to imagine that God hears only the prayers of believers, to resent so-called "deathbed" conversions, to divide God's world into "us" and "them." My own experience is that there is something of Jonah in us all.

Nonetheless, as God rescued Jonah, God rescues us. As God stuck with Jonah, God sticks with us. Jonah was a mess. I too am a mess. Yet, in spite of myself, God loves me

and won't let go, no matter how hard I squirm or fight. The Bible is filled with such stories because God is not merely a God of the second chance, he is a God of countless chances . . . he is a God of grace and mercy, whose faithfulness abounds from age to age.

Synopsis of the story of Jonah (from Wikipedia)

The plot centers on a conflict between Jonah and God. God calls Jonah to proclaim judgment to Nineveh, but Jonah resists and attempts to flee. He goes to [Joppa](#) and boards a ship bound for [Tarshish](#). God calls up a great storm at sea, and the ship's crew cast Jonah overboard in an attempt to appease God. A great [sea creature](#) sent by God, swallows Jonah. For three days and three nights Jonah languishes inside the fish's belly. He says a prayer in which he repents for his disobedience and thanks God for His mercy. God speaks to the fish, which vomits out Jonah safely on dry land.

After his rescue, Jonah obeys the call to prophesy against Nineveh, causing the people of the city to repent and God to forgive them. Jonah is furious, however, and angrily tells God that this is the reason he tried to flee from Him, as he knew Him to be a just and merciful God. He then beseeches God to kill him, a request which is denied when God causes a tree to grow over him, giving him shade. Initially grateful, Jonah's anger returns the next day, when God sends a worm to eat the plant, withering it, and he tells God that it would be better if he were dead.

God then points out: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (NRSV)"

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There are a lot of angles in the very short story of Jonah. As you look back over his story, which part strikes closest to your heart right now. Jonah's fear of what God has asked him to do? God's choice of "Jonah-the-mess" in the first place? Perhaps it is God's unyielding faithfulness to Jonah? Maybe God's outpouring of grace on the Ninevites? You might share some reflections on how this story speaks to you now.
2. Have you ever been angry with God? I mean really, truly ticked off. How did it make you feel? What did you do? Did you confront God? Did you talk with God about your anger? One of best things about the Psalms is their honesty. When the writer is angry, with God or anyone else, the Psalm expresses their anger. See Psalm 137 for a particularly hair-raising expression of anger. God loves us at our best and at our worst and like all good parents, God wants us to be honest and forthright in our prayers.
3. Jonah prays from the belly of the beast. How do you pray? Sometimes I need a short prayer that focuses my mind and heart. In his *Workbook of Living Prayer*, Maxie Dunnam writes about the "Jesus Prayer." This is a very simple, one-sentence prayer that Christians have prayed for centuries. The prayer goes like this:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Take a few minutes, center yourself on this simple prayer and silently repeat it to yourself several times. Then say it aloud, slowly and thoughtfully, at least five times. If you are part of a group, have someone lead the group in saying this prayer aloud in unison.

After you've spent some time simply saying the prayer, reflect on it and talk about it's meaning to you. What is it about this prayer that would have given it such endurance in the Christian community? What is the value in learning and praying prayers like this one; prayers that have been written and used by others?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Jonah 1:1-17 Jonah runs from Yahweh</p>	<p>Tuesday, Jonah 2:1-10 Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving</p>
<p>Wednesday, Jonah 3:1-10 Jonah's preaching and Nineveh's repentance</p>	<p>Thursday, Jonah 4:1-11 Jonah's anger at Yahweh's compassion</p>
<p>Friday, Nahum 3 The imminent ruin of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. It isn't hard to see why Jonah might think that God's mercy could never be extended to the Ninevites!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

