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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR****"Prayer from a Fish's Belly” Rev. Carl Haak July 31, 2011; No. 3578** |

Dear Radio Friends,

    In our last message on the prophet Jonah we praised God who did not let His disobedient prophet go but was committed to restore him to the path of obedience.  We learned that Jonah tried to run from God.  He did not believe God’s mercy should be shown to heathen Ninevites, the very people who were Israel’s enemies.  And he challenged God’s sovereignty, he challenged God’s very right to show mercy to whom He would show mercy and to harden whom He will ( [Rom. 9](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Rom+9)).   And in his disobedience, Jonah went down, down, and down.  He tried to get away from everything that would remind him of God and of his obligations to God.

      But God did not let him go.  In the narrative of Jonah, chapter 1, we see that God reveals His power to bring His child back.  We saw that it was God’s initiative, that God uses the whole creation at His disposal.  He brings a storm upon the ship.  He controls the roll of the dice to point the finger to Jonah.  And He even used pagan men to begin the process of rebuke.  We saw that God’s process of bringing Jonah back to the place of obedience was first of all to wake him up to the reality of his sin; to indict him through the means of unbelieving men; and to have him acknowledge his sin and his worthiness of death.

      We emphasized last week that God’s purpose was to restore Jonah to obedience, not to drown him.  Jonah, even when he was cast overboard from the ship, was not in the place of full repentance.  For that, God prepared a great fish to swallow him up.  And there Jonah, in his misery, is brought by grace to repent and to turn fully to God.

      Today we are going to look at the prayer that Jonah offered from the fish’s belly in the second chapter of Jonah.  Perhaps the only time in history that prayer came from that place.  But any place is a place of prayer.  There is no place like a fish’s belly, under three or four hundred feet of water, that so calls for prayer.  And there is no place where prayer will be more likely simply to magnify God and turn to Him alone.

      Jonah is brought very low.  That was the purpose of God.  God’s purpose was to show His grace and power.  As we come to this prayer, you should note with me that this is not all that Jonah prayed.  He was there for three days.  And he prayed without ceasing.  We have here only a summary of his prayer.  Secondly, you should note that the prayer is not, perhaps, organized with divisions and sub-points.  When you are in distress, you pour out your heart to God.

      But there are two things that come out in Jonah’s prayer.  First of all, his great distress and overwhelming fear.  “I cried … from the belly of hell….  I am cast out of thy sight … water compasses me and brings me down … my soul faints within me.”  Secondly, the prayer is characterized by faith in God’s mercy.  “He heard me.”  And that is before Jonah was delivered.  He says, “He heard me … I will look toward Thy holy temple … I will remember the Lord … salvation is of the Lord.”  Those two thoughts:  Jonah’s great distress and his faith in God’s mercy leapfrog over each other until at last Jonah is restored to obedience.

      “Then,” we read, “Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish’s belly.”  It was a great fish, probably a whale, or some other large fish perhaps not known to man.  We know that unbelief sneers and howls in mockery.  Clarence Darrow, in his great trial, said concerning a witness:  “Why, a person could believe this man’s testimony as easily as he could believe a fish swallowed Jonah.”  Well, we believe that a fish swallowed Jonah.  It is a fact.  A miracle, yes; but a fact.  Our God, who raised Jesus from the dead, could certainly cause a great monster of the deep to come alongside a boat when His prophet is thrown overboard and swallow him.  Besides, we have Jesus’ word on this.  When the unbelieving Sadducees and scribes asked Jesus for a sign to validate His claim as Messiah, He responded ([Matt. 12:39, 40](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Matt+12:39,40)), “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:  for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”   The reality of Jonah being swallowed by a fish, and Christ’s resurrection, go together.  This is reality, not myth.

      Try to put yourself in Jonah’s position.  He’s been picked up and he’s been flung over the side of a ship.  The waves have poured over him.  In all probability, he was not immediately swallowed but went through all that a man experiences in drowning, maybe even to the point of unconsciousness.  In verses 5 and 6 of his prayer he says that the weeds of the bottom wrapped themselves around his head and he felt the ooze of the muddy bottom.  He came to the roots of the mountains.  Whatever a man experiences in the last moments of drowning, Jonah experienced.  But he came to awareness and consciousness, coughing and sputtering.  And it dawned upon him that he must be in the belly of a fish.  He has air to breathe after a sort.  But he smells the rotting food in the stomach of the fish.  Think of the gastric juices, the stench, the darkness, the slimy, slopping around in the belly of a great fish.  After a while he is aware what has happened.  He has been brought down low, exceedingly low.  He is at the end of the earth.  Now the Scripture focuses, in [Jonah 2](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+2), not so much on what went on inside the fish, but on what went on inside Jonah.  There is where the real miracle is taking place.

      As I pointed out, back and forth Jonah prays of his misery and his faith in God.  He sees all of his misery as affliction from the hand of God.  He calls the fish’s belly “the belly of hell,” not profanely but because he felt that he had been cast out of the sight of God and he would be abandoned.  He who ran from God’s presence now fears that he is abandoned by God.  He fears that he has had it, that God is done with him.  He is in the depths of despair.

      But then he says, “When my soul fainted within me” (v. 7), “I remembered the LORD.”  There is the breaking forth of faith.  He says in verse 4, “I will look again toward thy holy temple.”  And in verse 7, “I remembered the LORD:  and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.”

      We need to apply this for just a moment.  In the belly of a fish, wretched, shocked with fear day after day after day, inwardly struggling against the demons of fear, Jonah cries out in faith to God.  Does that describe you?  No, you have not been in a fish’s belly—nothing so dramatic.  But has God, in restoring you, brought you to a place like that?  You struggle with fear that you are abandoned?  You are cast off?  You have only grief and misery?  By faith, God’s grace to you, you cry out to God?  You see, we have a great truth illumined here.  We gain an accurate picture of the spiritual life of a child of God when he is under trial and severe chastisement.  Affliction is the index of the soul.  An index will tell you what is in the book.  Chastisement tells you what God has put in the heart of His child.  Here is Jonah.  Up to this point in the book we see very little of the work of God in him.  We might even say, “How can he be a child of God, that disobedient man?”  But affliction shows the true Jonah.  When Jonah is down in the depths of the sea in the fish’s belly, you find out what God put down deep into him.

      What does affliction do to you?  In some children of God even the heaviest chastisement seems to produce no spiritual good.  God corrects and they become bitter, resentful, angry.  No sanctified spirit.  But here we see that God’s chastisement is having its intended effect.  The spell of Jonah’s sin is broken, shattered.  And in a humble and broken spirit, he cries to God to restore him in mercy.

      What was the primary concern of Jonah’s prayer?  We might answer that according to our own thinking:  “Get me out.”  Was Jonah’s primary concern simply to get out?  No.  Jonah’s primary concern in his prayer was not deliverance but a return to what he had so foolishly despised.  He had despised God’s presence.  Now, in the belly of the fish, it becomes his greatest treasure.  In chapter 1:3 we read that Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord.  And we saw that that meant that he wanted to put away from him everything that would remind him of Jehovah.  Jonah did not believe that God was simply confined to a place on earth.  But he wanted to have no dealings with God.  He did not want to have his heart pricked by the Word of God.  He did not want to be told that he was sinning.

      Now look at his primary concern in the belly of the fish (2:4).  “Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.”  Look to the holy temple?  In disobedience he did not want to be anywhere near that holy temple.  But now he looks toward that holy temple.  He looks to God’s presence, not simply to a building in Canaan, in Jerusalem, Solomon’s temple.  In a fish’s belly he did not know east from west, north from south, up from down.  But he says, “Here I am.  And in a sense I got exactly what I wanted.  I wanted to run from the presence of the Lord.  I got what I wanted.  But I can’t stand it.  I must have Him.  What I despised, what I foolishly turned from, what I squandered, I see now as the treasure above everything else.”  Verse 7, “When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD:  and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.”  He sees his prayer as a messenger that runs from a fish’s belly to God’s throne.

      Does that apply also to you and me?  The greatest cost of the sin of a backslidden Christian is that he has forfeited the experience of communion with God.  True repentance is a desire for the restoration of fellowship with God.  The words of the prodigal son, “I will arise and go to my father.  And I will say [what was he going to say?  Do you remember, children?  Was he going to say to his father, ‘I missed the well-spread table’?  ‘I missed my own room’?  ‘I missed all the things that were at home’?  No, ‘I will arise and go to my father and say’], father, I have sinned against thee.”  When you have lost God’s presence in disobedience, either by a deliberate disobedience or by multiplied carelessness and God now comes to chasten you, what happens?  By grace, you cry out, “I must have God!”  True repentance is evidence that the child of God wants the greatest treasure:  communion with God.

      You see, a Christian is not simply someone whose sins are forgiven and now he is off on his own so that he has comfort as he continues in his life of greed or lust or whatever it may be.  If that is the way you view a Christian, then you smear the cross of Jesus Christ.  Jesus died in order that we might have the treasure of Father’s house and fellowship.  When God restores you in repentance, when He brings the pincers of affliction into your life, His purpose is to restore you to fellowship, to have you treasure what you took so lightly, namely, the presence of God.

      But then we see also the working of faith in Jonah’s prayer.  Jonah begins to acknowledge the hand of God.  He sees that it was God who had cast him into the deep.  We would say, that is the way Jonah prays in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 2.  Now we might say when we read that, “I thought the pagan sailors cast him into the sea.  Didn’t they take up Jonah and cast him into the sea?”  Yes, they did.  But you see, Jonah sees beyond men.  “It was Thou, O God.”  Faith sees to the cause — God’s hand.  That, too, is repentance.  If God sees fit to chasten me and lead me down, it was God’s hand that did that, not fate.  Jonah recognizes that God’s hand had caught him in his disobedience and he
he submits to God.  Now what happens to you when God begins to affect your life, when He begins to deal with you because of your sins?  And the wind begins to blow and He begins to shake your life all around you?  Do you say, “Oh, things are not very good at home.  Things are not very good with my husband/wife/children”?  Do you say, “Oh, my problem is those people in the church, or those elders, or that church, or my problem is the economy or …”?  Oh, may God stop our stubborn, self-loving flesh and bring us to the point where we say, “Thy hand, O God, is upon me.”  May we acknowledge the living God as the creator and believe that God brings us back to repentance.

      By faith, Jonah recognizes God’s goodness in afflicting him.  He says, “God is bringing me up from corruption” (v. 6).  He says that he will “sacrifice unto God with a voice of thanksgiving” (v. 9).  And he even sees God’s goodness to him in the fish’s belly.  Chapter 1:12, he said, “I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.”  And he understands that although he deserved death, yet God had preserved his life.

      So he makes use of God’s Word as he prays.  Jonah quoted no fewer than seven times from the psalms in his prayer.  Some of them were verbatim.  The references were these:  [Psalm 130](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+130), Psalm 42, [Psalm 31](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+31), Psalm 18, and [Psalm 116](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+116).   Jonah is using various verses from the psalms mingled into his own prayer — because no book of the Bible so expresses the life of the child of God as the Psalms.  The Psalms are the written spiritual biography of the work of God’s grace.  Jonah was a prophet.  He had been a mouthpiece of God.  Nevertheless, when it comes to prayer, he begins to piece together the beautiful litany of the Psalms applied to his situation.

      You have the Bible, do you not?  Do the Scriptures form your prayers?  How did Jonah have the Bible?  Did he have it on a scroll?  No.  Did he have a candle?  Could he light a candle in a fish’s belly?  No.  How did he know?  He knew it, he had meditated upon it, he had learned it, it was in his heart.

      What about you?  You have God’s Word.  Do you store up God’s Word?  Do you store that Word up for days of trial?  Do you read it regularly day by day?  And in your prayers, does God’s Word come out from your lips?

      Jonah was brought down in his prayer to confess his sin.  Verse 8, he prays, “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.”  A lying vanity is an idol, anything that turns you from God.  Whatever takes the place of God is a lying vanity.  Jonah had observed the lying vanity.  That lying vanity was his own will.  He said “No,” to God.  He said that his own thoughts and desires were better than God’s.  Jonah made his own god.  “I will do as I want.”  He lifted himself over the Word of God and he forsook his own mercy.  Mercy here is the personification of God.  The God of mercy.  Instead of serving the merciful God, Jonah decided he would observe a lying vanity.  Jonah says that not to excuse, but to confess, to acknowledge, his sin.

      Then Jonah goes on to say in verse 9, “Salvation is of the Lord.”  I will pay my vows unto the Lord.  I vowed to be a prophet.  I vowed to go where He would send me.  I will pay that vow.  I will go back, the Lord being merciful to me, I will go back and go to Nineveh.  For salvation is of the Lord.

      That brought comfort.  The taking of a soul from guilt and bondage and forgiving that soul and freeing that soul from the bondage of sin is the work of God.  Salvation is of the Lord.  When you are in a fish’s belly, that much is clear.  Salvation is of the Lord.

      That must be clear to you today personally.  All of our belonging to God and all of our having God as our Father and as the Almighty One who cares for us in Jesus Christ, that was not due to anything of ourselves — not our will, not our work.  We do not take the credit for that.  Oh, you might take the credit today if you are standing on your own two feet in pride.  But not if you are in the belly of a fish, with the slime and ooze of your folly and your sin around you.  From the depths, when the waves and billows have gone over our soul, then we know one thing for sure:  Salvation is of the Lord.

      Why did God restore Jonah?  Because He would have Jonah first confess, “My salvation is of Thee, Lord.”  That is why the Lord does not let you go and restores you in repentance.

      Let us pray.

                Father, we thank Thee for Thy holy Word and we ask again that Thou wilt write it upon the pages of our hearts.  We pray in the name of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, Amen.