

Distressed Praying and Relentless Grace

Jonah 2

MPS God is worthy of our faith and obedience, and in steadfast love He pursues us with relentless grace to save.
OBJ Every person should turn and trust and obey the Lord because of four lessons.

INTRO Do you have any tension with God today? Are you sure? Is there anything pressing or tempting you to flee God?

READ Jonah 2:1-10

*Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying,
 "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me;
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
³For you 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.
⁴Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'
⁵The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.
⁷When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
⁸Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.
⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.
 Salvation belongs to the LORD!"
¹⁰And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. **Jonah 2:1-10***

Jonah prayed to the Lord from the belly of the fish. Chapter two finds Jonah in a bad place, and doing the only thing he knew to do, he prayed. He called out to the only One he knew he could help; and God heard him. This seems simple enough, does it not? When you are in a bad place, pray and God will hear you. But that message is far too simplistic for Jonah's prayer. If the chapter had only begun, "And Jonah prayed to the Lord", then we might could have let that suffice for today's message. But the verse continues, "*from the belly of the fish*". If we are to understand Jonah's prayer, we must remember his situation that produced it. There is far more for us today in this passage.

Jonah's prayer begins by calling out to the Lord from his helpless state. He prayed both out of "*distress*" and "*the belly of Sheol*", a reference to the place of the dead. Jonah was in great turmoil that had led him to a really bad place. He acknowledges that he began to pray because he was as good as dead. He's referring to the depth of the sea and his plea for help. This is one of those moments where Jonah's whole life flashed before mind because he thought he was going to die. [Here Jonah learns that the price of his rebellion is death. But he also knows that from his low place, God heard his voice and answered him.](#)

Jonah paints a picture of his death, burial, and grave.[.3] He is cast into the deep, the heart of the seas, where the flood waters surround him, and the waves and billows pass over him. The image is one of his sinking below to the depths of the sea. And by his acknowledgement, God is the one who cast him there. If this verse teaches us anything, it should remind us that the adage, "God never gives us more than we can handle", is a lie! [God always works by any means necessary to empower us to obey His command!](#)

He acknowledges that he is driven away from God's sight.[.4] At the low point of Jonah's situation when he knew he was dead, he determined that he would call out to God anyway. In his mind he was finished, but by his knowledge of God



he determined he would pray in spite of his situation.¹ There's something about death that makes everyone spiritual. Jonah's words were far less a statement of confidence and more action of doing what he knew to do even though he didn't know if it would work. But contrary to many religious sentiments, payer is not where the power is; God is the power. But every prayer God hears and answers is by His power, no matter where it originates from. Jonah prayed not because he felt like it nor for any reason other than it was his last-ditch effort. And because of who he prayed to his prayer was heard. Jonah's prayer only had power because God heard and answered it. [Desperate to get God's attention, Jonah's prayer reflects a turning of his situation.](#)

He elaborates further on his burial in the sea.[.5-6] As a stone covers the tomb's entrance, so the waters closed in over him. The deep surrounds and seaweed shrouds like burial cloths as he descends to the bottom of the sea. Jonah was convinced the sand of the sea's bottom would be his final resting place. But instead of his final resting place, the depth of the sea became the place of God's rescue. [God brought Jonah's life up from the pit of his rebellious ruin, but not before Jonah reached the bottom, even if only in his own mind.](#)

Finally, Jonah reflects on the Lord's salvation.[.7-9] When his life was fainting away, he remembered the Lord and his prayer reached Him in his holy temple. Jonah reflects on the vanity of worshiping dead idols, and how they lead one to forsake God's steadfast love. Surely the sailors reminded him of this vanity. He reflected on his own vain actions too. But his words also warn anyone who might think to do the same. [This reminder turns him to give thanks to the Lord, and to commit to the vow he made because what he knows of the Lord.](#)

And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.[.10] And with that God's sovereign rule over creation is again demonstrated. This statement of the fish vomiting is an expression typically used for God's judgment.² The truth is, God's judgment on sin is present in every act of salvation. God saved Jonah by sending the fish to swallow him, and by telling the fish to vomit him onto dry land. Jonah 1 and 2 end with God's salvation. [Jonah's salvation and deliverance included not an ignoring of his rebellion, but a cloaked judgment for his rebellion.](#)

[God is worthy of our faith and obedience, and in steadfast love He pursues us with relentless grace to save.](#)

Jonah is a fun study, but not an easy lesson. The difficulty of the study of Jonah confronts us with the reality of how God responds to us in our rebellion when we don't like what God commands of our life. But lest we relieve the tension too early, all is not well between Jonah and God. We need to recognize: Jonah did not repent on his own, he cried out in desperation. God in His steadfast love pursued Jonah with relentless grace to turn Him from his rebellion. Jonah recognizes this, even against his own state, and we should not miss it. We know God is not finished working on or in Jonah. And we know Jonah has not rooted out all his rebellion. [Jonah is wrestling with deep issues, tensions that he has with God.](#)

TRANS We would do well to learn more about God in this passage than to focus on Jonah.

Jonah teaches us much about God. He teaches that **God pursues us even in our sinful rebellion.** (Romans 5:8) **God hears and answers the prayer of His children,** regardless of the situation or place. **God disciplines His children because He loves us.** (Proverbs 3:11-12) Jonah knew God sent that storm for him, and until he stopped running and started swimming it would not calm down. God's relentless grace is not merely about giving some good to us but transforming us into His image. **God rescues His children for the glory of His Name.** Jonah knew God was the One who rescued him. And He knew why God rescued Him, for a glory that he had not yet fulfilled. God doesn't rescue from every situation, but the message of Jonah declares His rescuing love in Jesus Christ. **God is sovereign over all and is steadfast in His love.** Even in rebellion Jonah testifies that he knows this to be true of God. Notice Jonah never asks, "Where are you

¹ H. L. Ellison, "[Jonah](#)," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel and the Minor Prophets, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 377. Ellison explains, "'Yet I will look again,' though a legitimate rendering, is open to misunderstanding. It is not a statement of salvation but of Jonah's determination to pray in spite of his banishment; probably 'but' would suit the sense better."

² James Bruckner, [Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 77. Bruckner writes, "Jonah's regurgitation by the fish onto the land is not a happy transport, but it is his salvation. In the Old Testament, vomiting is usually a metaphor of judgment."



God?” He knew God was present the whole time, even though God does not speak to him, pursuing him out of steadfast love. But most important we learn by the refrain of the whole prayer that salvation belongs to the Lord. *“Salvation belongs to the Lord” is not so much Jonah’s testimony but his confession of submission to the Lord’s sovereignty over His life.*

Jonah 2 is a psalm of thanksgiving to the Lord. But the reader is left with a sense of tension that all is not fully resolved. The psalm represents a turning to the Lord. And while Jonah says all the right things, he doesn’t say everything; he never confesses. There is tension with God because of Jonah’s rebellion. He didn’t like God’s command, didn’t agree with, and did not want to obey. Here is the issue we face in Jonah: **How do we deal with God with tension in our heart toward God?**

OBJ **Four Lessons from Jonah turn us to trust and obey the Lord.**

Lesson 1: Jonah identifies our tension with God; we are not God.

Sin sets us against God, makes us His enemy, and produces rebellion toward Him. But the one thing sin cannot do is make us God. Most don’t claim to be God, but our heart often makes this claim every time it takes issue with God. One commentator explains Jonah this way, “The tension of Jonah’s life, however, is that he loves Yahweh but has taken serious action against God’s intention to offer forgiveness to the violent (as he and Yahweh discuss in ch. 4). The tension between his “temple piety” and his attitudes toward the unjust world are true to life. The tensions represents the honest struggle (and even confusion) of a person who has not resolved the incongruities of living in changing and challenging times. Jonah’s song is true praise with a hint of protest.”³

“Hint of protest” is the most convicting phrase. You may not be in full-scale rebellion, but ask yourself this, **“Is there any ‘hint of protest’ with God in your heart?”** **Is there any...unresolved issue causing anger, hurt, or bitterness toward God?, ...any broken relationship that continually returns to mind where you have not done all you can do to reconcile?, ...any part of His Word that you don’t understand, like, or agree with, that you have not yet surrendered to Him?, ...any command God has given that you have not obeyed? Do you know where your tension with God remains, any ‘hint of protest’ in you?**

Lesson 2: Jonah’s refrain, “Salvation belongs to the Lord” is our declaration that God is worthy.

The only way we resolve our tension, that hint of protest, is the same way Jonah did, by making our refrain in all things, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” God is high and exalted, seated in His holy temple, worthy of all glory, honor, and praise. God does not owe you anything; He is not indebted to you. He does not owe you to meet your demand of convincing you His will is right, just or best. He does not owe you to make you feel like you want to obey before you do trust to obey. And, He does not owe you to make all things work out in accordance with your will, want, or wishes. What we are “owed” is never what we want! But God is pursuing YOU to forgive and cleanse, and redeem you from your sin, to serve the glory of His Name. **Jesus is worthy of your trust and obedience, your whole life in full surrender to Him.**

Lesson 3: Jonah had to face his own death to learn the price of his rebellion, but he didn’t have to endure it. There is One who did endure death for sin for us. Jesus obeyed the Father knowing the price of his obedience, death on a cross, and He willingly endured it for you. Only Jesus can relieve your tension with God because the cloaked judgment in your salvation is what He bore from God on the cross for your sin. Jonah was never in threat, but he didn’t know that. Until we die fully to self we cannot live completely unto Christ. As long as parts of our heart and life remain under our control, within the scope of our capabilities, we will not trust God to control those areas of our life. **Redemption in Jesus reveals our own death by faith in the hands of God, where we find the sufficiency and security of our salvation.**

Lesson 4: The Lord invites us to call out to Him, and find Him steadfast in love and relentless in grace to save.

Situations of our rebellion never dictate the outcome of our salvation. No matter where you are when God finds you, He always delivers you where He wants you, not where circumstances put you. One quote I found exceptionally helpful and comforting in this study was this. “Jonah prays what he is capable of praying—and not more. God accepts the prayer for

³ James Bruckner, [Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 83.



what it is: a stiff but true expression of thanks for not drowning. He uses formal poetry to express himself precisely because he is in the slime of the belly, going back to old familiar clichés and forms of the psalms he knows by heart.”⁴ Your prayer doesn’t have to be perfect. Say what you can to the Lord today, and hear what He is saying to you.

God is worthy of our faith and obedience, and in steadfast love He pursues us with relentless grace to save.

⁴ James Bruckner, [Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 81.

