

A prayer about what?

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[0 : 00] And let's pray briefly as we begin our short time together. Let's pray. We've just sung, gracious God, that you're a God of vast love, costly love, love that gives itself for the rescue of hostile people.

And we pray that whatever our situation in life today, whether we come here from trouble or from calm, whether we come here knowing much about you or not, you would please help us to understand more about your loving character and how we should respond.

Please give us clarity of mind in this short time. Help us to concentrate. Make us eager to learn from you. We ask these things in the name of your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me welcome you again very warmly. Before we read the Bible together, let me just point you to these little booklets. We've got a number of these outside on the shelves on the way out.

It's a copy of Luke's gospel, but it's a copy of Luke's gospel, particularly designed with a Commonwealth sort of gamesy feel to it. Because inside, as well as the words of the gospel, we have accounts of the ways in which various international athletes came to know Christ and to experience his love for yourselves.

[1 : 44] If that would be good for you or for anyone you know, please do grab one on the way out or even a handful and give them away and read them yourself. Now we're going to turn to our Bible reading from the day and you'll find that in Jonah chapter two.

And if you're following in one of the blue Bibles, that's page 774. I'm going to read from 117.

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 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. For 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. Then I said, I'm driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me.

[2 : 59] Weeds were wrapped about my head. At 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.

When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Jonah chapter 2 has been the cause of huge controversy over the last hundred years or so.

Because in Western Christianity, we've been through a period of huge anti-supernaturalism. And there isn't anything in the Bible quite as hard for the anti-supernaturalist mindset to deal with than a man surviving three days and three nights in the belly of a fish.

[4 : 10] How can that happen? People have said. Perhaps this story is a metaphor for the state of Jonah's mind at the time, or a metaphor for the state of the people of Israel at the time.

People have said. Those more inclined to take the story at face value, a story of a man in a fish for three days, have done things like try to work how on earth it could be possible for someone to stay alive inside a fish for three days.

What kind of fish could it be? Inside which one could stay alive for a considerable period of time?

And so on and so on. But let me say that such speculations are simply not the concern of this part of the Bible.

Well, one author puts it like this. What sorts of fish people can live inside is not an interest of the scriptures. All we're told about the fish is what we're told in 117 and 210.

Let me say four things briefly about the fish. One, it was a big one. Two, God gave it the job of swallowing Jonah. Three, it did that.

[5 : 17] Four, when God spoke to it three days later, it vomited him up on the beach. That's all we know about the fish. It might be a big one, but it is not a big player in the drama.

Now, before we move on, can I just say that if the fish and how Jonah could have survived in it for three days and three nights is a huge problem to you, you probably haven't really begun to grasp how big the true God really is.

The God of the Bible is the God of limitless power over everything that he's made. He has total mastery of the whole created order. He's not tied to impersonal laws of nature.

He is the law of nature. He rules everything every second, keeps everything existence all the time. You owe your present breath, your ability to listen to these words, the fact that the chair holds you up this second to God's constant sustaining activity.

The fish is just one of his things. He uses it how he wants. And if he wants Jonah to stay alive inside it, then he's well able to make that happen.

[6 : 30] He simply doesn't have a problem doing what he wants to do in his world. No, the biggest puzzle about chapter two is not the fish. The biggest puzzle about chapter two is how a man who seems so grateful to the rescuing God in chapter two can be so furiously angry at the rescuing God in chapter four.

That's the big puzzle. How does that work? Some have said that chapter two doesn't really belong with the rest of the book. It's much too positive feeling.

And of course, it's such a different style from the rest of the book. The rest is story. Here we break out into poetry, into a psalm really. It's something that could be sung.

And that seems really odd, breaking into poetry in the middle of a story. However, Bible stories often have poetic interludes like these.

They're not uncommon. And usually the poetic interludes are very important in explaining what's going on in the story. This is not like a musical.

[7 : 43] Now, I don't know if you're a person who likes musicals or doesn't like musicals. I'm not really a musical sort of person. Because in musicals, people are just randomly bursting into song all the time.

And the bursting into song moments aren't always really relevant to the storyline. Any excuse for a song will do. But not so in the Bible.

In the Bible, the poems within the stories often take you right to the heart of what's going on. And I think this one does too.

And so I want you to notice how joined up this poetic bit is to the rest of the letter. Compare chapters 1 and 2, for example. In chapter 1, we have a rescue story.

The sailors rescued. In chapter 2, we have a rescue story. Jonah rescued. In both cases, people get into trouble on the sea. In both chapters, people pray for help to the God of Israel.

[8 : 45] In both chapters, God hears and rescues. The sailors in chapter 1, Jonah in chapter 2. And in both cases, the people who've been rescued make vows to God.

Look at chapter 1, verse 16 for a moment. Here's the sailors. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Now look over to chapter 2, verse 9. Here's Jonah at the end of his prayer. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. So do you see there are very strong parallels between chapter 1 and chapter 2. Chapter 2 fits right into the story.

So what is going on? Well, this is introduced as Jonah's prayer to God from the fish to one. Then, after being swallowed, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.

[9 : 54] Up to this point in the story, Jonah has not prayed at all. As far as we can see, anyway. He's been stubbornly silent towards God. Remember the story? God has given him a command.

Go and speak to the great city of Nineveh. He has deliberately disobeyed the command. And he's done more than that. He could have stayed at home. Instead, he has headed for the sea. A positively anti-God thing to do in the Bible.

The sea is loaded in the Bible with anti-God imagery. He has chosen the realm of chaos, disorder, evil, and death rather than continue to serve the true God.

It's almost as if he's opted for the dominion of darkness rather than the kingdom of light. And in chapter 1, it's clear both to the sailors and to him that God is against him in this.

But he doesn't pray. And he doesn't ask for forgiveness. And he doesn't turn around and go back and do the job he's been told to do. He seems stubbornly determined to die in the deep. But what we find is in chapter 2, just as the waters close over his head, and just as death approaches, in the end, his life is too precious for him to lose.

[11:06] And he prays. And from the belly of the fish, finding himself suddenly rescued from death in the deep, he recounts what has just happened.

Let's look at this prayer, and then we'll try to reflect on what it's doing here in the book. In many ways, this is a very typical sort of Thanksgiving poem in the Bible. You can find a number of poems like this in the book of Psalms.

Usually, the person writing is thanking God for some sort of rescue from some sort of calamity or other. This prayer has three parts. First is an introduction in verse 2.

It sets the scene for what follows. I called. God answered me. I cried. You heard my voice. That's what the poem's about.

His prayer and God's answer to it. Then we have a middle section which recounts the story itself. This is what happens as Jonah. The crisis in the sea.

[12:02] How desperate it was. How he cried to God and God rescued him. There are two parts to this middle bit. They both end with a mention of the temple. Verse 4. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.

Verse 7. My prayer came to you into your holy temple. The first part, verses 3 and 4, emphasize how God cast Jonah into the water.

Verse 3. You cast me into the deep. The second part, verses 5 to 7, emphasize how God rescued Jonah out of the water. Verse 6.

You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. So in this section, the situation that Jonah's been rescued from is described. Then finally, verses 8 and 9, we have a conclusion with a personal vow of obedience to God.

Let me say three things about this poem. Three odd things about this poem in this place. Jonah refers to the Lord a number of times.

[13:20] Verse 2. The Lord hears and answers his cry. Verse 3. The Lord is in charge of his situation. Verse 6. It is God who brought up Jonah's life from the depths of the pit.

Verse 9. Salvation belongs to the Lord. God gets more than a mention in this poem. But I wonder if you noticed how orientated around Jonah Jonah's words are.

His distress. His life and death situation. His words. And most especially, his activity. As I read quickly through, notice the I's and me's and my's.

Verse 2. I call that of the Lord out of my distress. He answered me. I cried. You cast me into the deep. Verse 3. The flood surrounded me.

All your waves and billows passed over me. I am driven away. I shall again look. The waters closed in over me. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were trapped around my head. I went down to the land.

[14:22] I, I, I, I, my, me. All the way through. Now, you might well argue. Well, of course he's in there. It's his prayer about what happened to him.

But is this how you would pray? Finding yourself suddenly, amazingly alive in the middle of a fish. Rather than being dead at God's hand in the depths of the sea.

Wouldn't you go, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. I can hardly believe it. Thank you. Let me illustrate.

I nearly had a catastrophic accident on my bicycle some years ago. It was partly my fault. My brakes were not good. I'd known for a while that they weren't good and they needed attention and I had not attended to them.

It was back when I was a student. It was a long time ago. I was slightly late for class. I was coming downhill a bit too fast. Busy road. Parked cars all along one side.

[15:21] Junction on the other side of the road a bit further down. I was just coming towards the end of the row of parked cars on this side. When suddenly somebody pulled into the road from the

junction opposite.

They'd obviously not seen me. There was absolutely nothing I could do about it. I could not stop. I was going very quickly. I knew I was going to hit that car.

I knew it was going to be bad. I rehearsed it in my mind. I just had time to yell loudly and to think, oh, which bit am I going to break first? And suddenly, extraordinarily, I found myself through this tiny gap between the front of the car and the parked cars on the side.

I was going very, very quickly. Do you think I came away from that saying, cool, what a smart driver you are to get through that gap?

No, the sense of relief was just overwhelming. And all I could say was, thank you, Heavenly Father, for getting me through that. Now, I negotiated my way through that gap.

[16:33] I don't know how it happened. But I know that the Lord got me through it. When you know you've been in extreme danger, especially if it's down to you, thoughts of what you did are far away from your mind.

But this is not that kind of prayer. It does mention God and his activity. You cast me in, verse 3. You pulled me out, verse 6. Salvation belongs to the Lord, verse 9.

But most of the active verbs talk about what Jonah has done. Verse 2. I called. I cried. Verse 4. I said.

Verse 7. I remembered the Lord. Good for me. Verse 9. With the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you. Yeah, God is the rescuer in Jonah's mind.

But there's much more here about Jonah's prayer for rescue than God's rescue of Jonah. God is acknowledged, but Jonah is center stage.

[17:39] Can I say that Jonah's words about God are true? They're orthodox words. But his orientation is far from orthodox. Even in that moment of euphoria, after deliverance, his thoughts revolve around himself.

God is acknowledged, but Jonah is in the middle of the picture. Isn't that odd? Second odd thing. He admits his danger, but not his disobedience.

I mentioned before that there are a good number of psalms, a bit like this one in the Bible. Psalms of thanksgiving after deliverance from some sort of danger. I say some sort of danger because often in those thanksgiving psalms, the situation that was dangerous is not all that clearly in view. It's just a really bad thing happened. And the Lord rescued me. And I'm so grateful to him for doing that. The details of the situation and how it happened and how they got there are not that important often.

This poem of thanks looks very like one of those. It's full of the danger and it's certainly thankful. You could almost take it out and put it in the book of psalms and have it stand on its own.

[19:02] And that's what's odd about it. Because unlike those stand-alone thanksgiving psalms, this is not a stand-alone poem.

It's seriously rooted in a situation. And that makes its content seem very unusual. You see, Jonah's predicament is not some random, undeserved mishap that God rescues him from.

The reasons for Jonah's danger have been laid out in great detail in chapter 1. He's a prophet. He's been used by God back home in Israel. But he'd rather die than be used by God in Nineveh.

His actions towards God have been those of an enemy. He knows that. Look back at chapter 1, verse 11. The sailor said to him, what shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us?

For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you. He knows that God is his enemy at this point. And that's what makes his prayer so odd.

[20:09] For though the prayer does recognize God's hostility towards him, look at 2, 3, you cast me into the deep. At no point, at no point in this prayer is there any acknowledgement of his role in the difficulty, of his gross disobedience of the chapter before.

He mentions that he prayed for deliverance, but not at any point that he prayed for forgiveness. The poem goes, that was a very bad situation.

I'm so glad that I prayed and God rescued me. The situation the poem describes is much more like this. I was very wicked and extraordinarily, God has had mercy on me.

There's not a hint of that in Jonah's words. He admits his danger, but not his disobedience. Isn't that odd? Given that his disobedience is the cause of his danger.

Third thing that's odd. He compares himself favorably with the sailors he just left behind on the surface.

[21 : 23] Let me read from verse 7. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you into your holy temple.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. He prays to the Lord. Other people, he says, pay attention to vain idols and have no hope of steadfast love.

But I pray to the Lord and I will sacrifice to the Lord. Do you see how here he puts himself in the position of faithful orthodoxy?

I'm not an idolater. I'm the one who prays to the true God. The one who has access to God's covenant love. The one who does worship rightly. And the pagans, well, there's no hope for them.

[22 : 28] They worship vain idols. Now contrast this with chapter 1 again, where we find quite the opposite is true. Who is the disobedient one in chapter 1?

Jonah is. Who takes the course of action away from God's steadfast love? Jonah does. Who has the accurate view of the God of Israel in chapter 1?

The sailors do. They don't start off with an accurate view of the God of Israel. They all start praying to their own gods. But boy, do they learn quickly. They don't know much.

But what they know, they know rightly. Look at chapter 1, verse 9. Here's Jonah's words about his situation. I am a Hebrew. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

Then the men were exceedingly afraid. And they said to him, what is this that you've done? What a numbskull you are, running away from the God who made everything.

[23 : 36] What kind of idiot are you? You see, look at Jonah's claim. The reality is that Jonah does not fear the God who made everything. He thinks he does.

But he's running away in the opposite direction. The sailors are the ones who know God rightly. Look at what they do. They're exceedingly afraid. That's the right response to being in a boat with a guy who's running away from the true God.

Be afraid. In chapter 1, who worships God truly? Well, the sailors do. Look at verse 15. They picked up Jonah.

They hurled him into the sea. And the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. And offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

The sailors are the ones who know God rightly and worship God rightly in chapter 1. Not Jonah. But in chapter 2, Jonah looks back on the storm and the sea and the sailors.

[24 : 37] And he says to himself, those pagans up there, no hope of steadfast love for them. But I remember the Lord. And I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to him.

Three very odd things then. God is acknowledged, but Jonah is right in the middle of his thoughts. He admits his danger, but not his disobedience. He compares himself favorably with the believing foreigners that he's just left behind in his disobedience.

Now, what are we to make of all this? Why is this book in the Bible? Let me ask that question again. I asked it last week. Well, it certainly makes it clear to us if we needed reminding that God's prophets are far from perfect.

You don't think, do you, that people who speak for God are perfect people? You don't think that, do you? You don't think that about the people in the Bible who spoke for God? They're not perfect people. I hope you don't think that about your church minister now.

No. People are not, Christian workers are not perfect people. Now, it certainly reminds us of that, but I think it's here for a much bigger reason. You see, back home in Israel, back home in Israel, things have been going well.

[25 : 55] Things have been going well for the nation under their expansionist king, Jeroboam II. It's been a good time in Israel's history the last few decades.

Things have been going well for Jonah, the prophet that God has used to expand the kingdom. But things are not well back home.

I'd like you to turn very quickly to 2 Kings chapter 14. You'll find that on page 321. Back home, things look good, but they're not good.

Verse 23.

In the 15th year of Amaziah, the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria. The verdict on him is verse 24, that he did what was evil.

[26 : 56] But we find out, verse 25, that he widens the borders. And he widens the borders according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah.

You see, Jonah's been very fruitful back home. And the kingdom looks like it's going well back home. But things are not going well. Jeroboam is an evil king.

And what is mentioned particularly about him, verse 24, he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.

I wonder if you remember what those sins were, the sins of Jeroboam, the sons of Nebat. Well, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, erected golden calves, idols, at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom.

It was a political move to consolidate power and loyalty to him. But Jeroboam, the first, led the nation into wholesale idolatry.

[28 : 01] And Jeroboam, the second, continued along that trajectory. Jonah has been used for good in this situation. But fundamentally, though things look good, this is an idolatrous nation.

It is not a nation faithful to the true God. Jonah knows only too well. Jonah chapter 2 and verse 8. Yet he is so tied in, in his mind, to the privileged position his nation has occupied.

And the successful course his ministry has run, that he doesn't consider for a moment that his nation might be turning to idols.

And that such privileges are not guarantees of safety. Comfort and success breed pride in individuals and in nations.

[29 : 15] Jonah does not consider that God might remove his nation's privileges. He is very angry indeed that God might remove him from a successful ministry back home and put him at work over there with those pagans.

He doesn't consider for a moment that God might be angry with his personal disobedience. But the truth is that the true God, the God he's supposed to know and serve, is the God of heaven.

Who made the sea and the dry land. He will have mercy on anyone who fears him. No matter where they come from.

No matter what their background is. And no person, no group, no nation, no minister, no church, no tradition is in a position of such privilege that proud disobedience will go unnoticed.

Let's pray together. Amen. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

[30 : 39] Then the men were exceedingly afraid. What is this that you have done? Gracious God, we pray that you would have mercy on us.

We pray that you would restrain us from thinking that a position of privilege and of access to you gives license for stubborn disobedience or for pride.

We thank you that you're the creator of everything. That everything belongs to you. That you use everything precisely as you choose. And that your mercy extends to all of those who fear you.

Help us to think the same way. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.