

Week 2 of the story of Jonah – today it’s all about what Jonah did while he was inside the fish. He prayed – a lot!

I like the story of a small-town church. The pastor was very upset because a pub opened up down a few miles away. The pastor said, “We’re not going to have a pub in this town.” He said, “We’re going to pray them out of business,” and so they had prayer meetings and they prayed for hours at a time. They’d pray, “God, would you run them out of business. Get rid of this bar,” and sure enough, after quite some time of praying, the building was struck by lightning and the bar burned to the ground. Well, the bar owner found out and he sued the church. The judge was listening to testimonies, and the bar owner said, “It’s this pastor’s fault. It’s this church’s fault. Those people are praying. Because of their prayers, God struck us with lightning.” The pastor said, “Oh, no, no, no, no. Those were just little harmless prayers. I mean, we’re just doing our little church meetings. It’s not our fault that God did this,” and the judge looked on and said, “This is very interesting. Here we have a bar owner that believes in the power of prayer and a pastor, who does not.”

People pray in all sorts of places and for all sorts of things! (video)

Praying is just having a conversation with God. It took quite a lot to get Jonah to pray. Jonah had run away from God and didn’t want to listen to what God had to say to him. So he ended up spending 3 days and nights in the belly of a big fish. I quite sure that he wasn’t in there writing by candlelight and that some of his prayer was simply, “Help!” This is him looking back and remembering and writing down what he learned inside the fish.

He starts by saying, “In my distress” Often it is when we are at our most vulnerable that we turn to God. Even people who don’t really believe in God, or aren’t sure if he’s there, speak to him sometimes – usually to help them get through something bad. So, here’s Jonah and he’s in trouble, so he calls out to God. And what happened? God answered him!

Isn’t that amazing. God, who created everything, who keeps it in place, who is ever present and all powerful, answers us when we pray. After basically saying, “stuff you!” to God and running away, when Jonah came back to God, he got an answer. God, in his mercy, answered him. And God will answer us if we speak to him. Sometimes that answer will be an actual voice that we hear. Sometimes it will be a thought that comes into our heads, or a feeling, or something unusual that happens, or something that someone says to you, and you’ll know it is God answering your prayer. Sometimes nothing happens because sometimes the answer is to wait, or even “No”. But God always hears our prayers.

Jonah was praying from what is called Sheol – translated as the grave, or hell, or the depths. In other words, he's saying, from the point in which I was furthest from God, from the place where I was miserable and had no way to contribute, from the place where I was helpless and desperate and afraid and hurting, that's where I called on God. Perhaps that's how you feel today. Maybe you are in a situation and you think it can't get any worse and maybe you feel very far from God. Everything might look great on the outside but inside you're depressed and hurting and afraid and things are not right. Jonah was like that and he is really saying, "When I needed Him most, and I deserved it the least, He was there for me." Sometimes though we don't wait for the answer. I remember having a conversation with someone who said that he had tried praying and that it hadn't worked, so God could not be real – actually what he meant was that he didn't get what he wanted and he was using that as an excuse to ignore God.

At any moment God could have made everything right for Jonah. He could have had the sailors throw Jonah a lifebelt, but he didn't. He could have provided a smaller boat, but he didn't. He could have made life easier for Jonah, but he didn't, because Jonah still had something to learn. God still performed a miracle and he was still actively working for Jonah even although Jonah was in trouble.

Watch the different phases of God's work. "Jonah, go." Jonah says, "No." Jonah gets on a ship.

1. Phase one, God sends a storm. It doesn't work.
2. Phase two, God sends the captain. "You need to pray."
3. Phase three, the sailors have mercy on him and don't throw him overboard.
4. Phase four, when they do throw him overboard, God sends a fish.
5. Phase five, the fish gets a tummy ache and throws him up onshore.

God does the same for us: through different phases he leads us, teaches us, redirects us, guides us, heals us, corrects us, convicts us so that He has our attention and we start doing what he asks us to.

In that really difficult place Jonah says:

*6 I had sunk down below the underwater mountains;
I knew that forever, I would be a prisoner there.
But, you, Lord God, rescued me from that pit.*

Everything was going wrong for Jonah but God had other plans. In various places in the bible we're told that God wants what is best for us and that his plans are for our good, but we're often slow to remember or believe that.

It's as if, from the deepest point in his life, he is warning those readers of his time and warning us today. And he's saying basically, "Whatever you do, don't do what I did. Whatever you do, don't run from God. Whatever you do, don't neglect Him and don't disobey Him." Verse 8, here's how he says it. He says, "*Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.*"

An idol is something that we let get between us and God – for Jonah it was prejudice: he hated the Assyrians and wanted nothing to do with them despite what God said. Then he had 'self': In other words, "I heard God, but I don't care what He said. I'm going to do what I want to do."

I don't know what gets between you and God: it might be that you think he doesn't exist; it might be that you think you don't need him in your life; it might be sport, or work. But Jonah says when we do that we turn away from God's love. It's not that God stops loving us but we don't experience it in the way we should.

Then, I like what Jonah did. He didn't make excuses. Look in verse 9, he says, "*What I have promised I will make good.*" What did he vow? We don't know. Jonah was a prophet and he heard from God and spoke for God so I suspect that what he vowed was, "God, if You tell me to speak, I will speak. If You tell me to go, I'll go."

Someone here today has something that God is asking you to make good today. I don't know what it is, but you know that God has put something on your heart, and you need to make good. You know what it is, but you haven't done it. Today God says to each of us, "Come on home. Don't turn away from my love. The plans I have for you are for good."