

A Fishy Prayer
Jonah 2

Friends, have you ever had instantly regretted something... when the realization of what you have actually done suddenly hits you.

Maybe you've been treated unfairly at work. Your supervisor or your boss is always finding ways to make your life difficult – this time she tells you to stay late and redo some work that someone else has messed up because she doesn't think you have anything better to do after work anyways.

And now you're sitting behind your desk fuming about it. And you are steamed, boy are you mad – this has been going on for too long now and suddenly you just decide you're not going to take it anymore.

You are going to march into her office and tell her that you aren't going to take this, that she can find someone else to do her stupid paperwork, that if she insists that you stay late tonight she can find someone else to take your place!

So you barge into her office and let her have a piece of your mind – you issue your ultimatum and very calmly she picks up her phone and calls HR to ask if they can send in a temp starting tomorrow morning since a new opening has just come available...

And instantly you are regretting what you've done! All that anger and frustration you were feeling just seconds ago is immediately replaced by a feeling of panic and the thought of “Oh no... what did I have done?!”

Friends as we listen to Jonah praying to YAWEH in the belly of the fish I think that he experienced some instant regret when he went over the side of the boat into the water.

I mean Jonah was pretty wound up about what YAWEH had told him to do, and in the state he was in he pretty much had decided that he would **never** go and preach to Nineveh, they were the enemies of Israel, in fact – and I can almost hear him say it – He'd rather die than go to Nineveh!

And as He's being thrown over the side of the ship into the dark, raging waters of the Mediterranean Sea - He starts to call into question the wisdom about giving YAWEH his ultimatum about dying instead of going to Nineveh.

And as he flounders in the water, gasping for air, the realization sets in that when he goes under the next time – he won't be coming back up. And every fiber of his being is filled with regret as the realization of what he has done sinks in (no pun intended)

Friends – you won't win when you play chicken with God. If He calls us to do something that where we say we would rather die than obey – God won't blink friends, and we'll end up with a case of instant regret.

This just goes to show us how deeply Sin affects us that we would do something so foolish as issue ultimatums to the Almighty.

And when YAWEH calls our bluff – we instantly realize the foolishness of what we've done.

And in Jonah's case - he had not only had sent himself to his death, but he'd sent himself to his death at sea.

Now we would all agree that going to your death is terrible and some of us would fear death by drowning more than others perhaps...

But to the ancient mind the Sea wasn't just a large body of water – it was the realm of chaos, it was an unpredictable and unknown. It embodied the terror and fear of the ancients that their lives and their civilization could be easily and quickly be overthrown by an unexpected natural disaster generated by evil spiritual powers.

The Sea represented the limits of the power of the gods, they might have defeated the forces of chaos and confined them to the sea when they created the world – but they couldn't eliminate them, at best they could set boundaries and try to keep the sea in place.

But that was a tenuous victory, because the Sea always strained at its boundaries, pounding at them relentlessly, insatiable in its

appetite for destruction, always looking for a way to break through.

And if we look at what the storm surge from Hurricane Katrina did to New Orleans and what Sandy did to New York and New Jersey I think we can begin to get a sense of how the ancients viewed the sea and what they feared in it.

So understanding what the Sea meant to the ancients means that that Jonah realizes he's going to die, but that he also realizes that He will drown in a place where it was believed that God was absent, where terrors and monsters lurked. So he wasn't just dying, he was going to Hell.

And if we could watch it on film we'd probably see Jonah sinking down into the abyss below and then out of that darkness we begin to see something take shape

– a great set of gaping jaws which belong to a massive creature
– and when those jaws close – Jonah is suddenly cut off from our view. Swallowed by a giant fish.

Now we're not sure what to make of this – It certainly doesn't look like a rescue – it looks more like Jonah will meet his end being drowned and eaten.

But the fish is sent by YAWEH – and so we see... and Jonah experiences that there is no place in this creation – even in the darkest depths of the sea where YAWEH cannot reach, where He does not rule.

The sea is not really the realm of chaos – it is still the realm of YAWEH and it does His bidding.

And we need to be reminded of this friends – not so much because we're tempted to believe that Christ might not be with us in the depths of the ocean or in the far reaches of the South Pole should we ever find ourselves there...

But because for us – the Sea is now our Psyche. What the ancients feared about the Sea, we fear about our inner psychological state, and how it can come undone, how it can overwhelm us and throw our life into turmoil, we fear what might lurk inside us...

And it's not a matter of if, but when - we will have to face our inner depths and darkness when we must deal with a disaster, a death, or something that shakes us to the core of who we are.

And the fact that YAWEH sends a fish to swallow Jonah in the depths of the sea is a reminder to us that He can reach us - even in the inner depths of our psyche where we feel like He is nowhere to be found when we are coming undone and He is able continue to hold us in His will.

And in time... we will begin to recognize YAWEH in those dark circumstances when we aren't sure if we feel dead or alive, and how its take us to recognize his work is really up to Him.

When we hear that after three days and three nights Jonah finally prayed - its not necessarily seventy two hours precisely - this is a phrase often used in the bible to say that YAWEH had allowed the right amount of time had pass in order to facilitate what He had intended to occur.

The chronological amount of time which it takes to effect transformation and heart change is not important; instead what's important is that we realize that it takes time - its not instant transformation.

So after "three days and three nights" in the belly of the fish, Jonah finally comes to the end of himself - and his disobedience and rebellion finally dies in the belly of that fish... and he reaches out to YAWEH and he prays and he repents.

Now we might wonder if Jonah's prayer is truly authentic or if it's a bit "fishy" We tend to question the authenticity of deathbed or jailhouse conversions.

Is this just something that happens because of the instant regret which Jonah had when he realized he was going to die? Men will say all sorts of things to save their own skin.

Well I believe that it's genuine, Jonah is not making this stuff up - in fact he is composing this prayer by quoting bits and pieces of scripture.

He draws a great deal from the Psalms – which we would expect... the Psalms often help people in desperate situations voice their feelings about what they have done, deal with their guilt and respond to how YAWEH is helping them in all of that.

That's another point to remember friends – that we can turn to the Psalms to give voice to our feelings when we find ourselves in desperate situations in life, when we're not sure exactly what to say when we come to the end of ourselves and our own resources.

At that point the Psalms become our voice they give us word to help us respond to what YAWEH has allowed to come to pass in our life.

But there is one particular line of scripture which Jonah uses which reveals that he's had a change of heart.

Twice he uses the phrase “towards your holy temple”

And again, as we did last week, we must go back to the book of Kings, where King Solomon has just finished building the temple - and chapter 8 records Solomon's prayer of dedication where this phrase that Jonah has quoted is originally used.

And we see that Jonah has taken this phrase from 1 Kings 8:48 where it says “toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name”

This is significant for Jonah – remember... he is from the Northern Kingdom, and Jerusalem and the Temple is south in the rival kingdom of Judah. And the Kings of the North had set up an alternative religion and alternative places for worship so that political loyalties wouldn't be undermined by people going south for religious reasons.

But now Jonah looks south, he turns towards YAWEH's temple and in doing so admits that the alternative religion and worship site of the Northern Kingdom is sinful – it's wrong. And so he confesses “that those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs”

He's not talking about Nineveh, or the sailors who cried out to their own gods... He's talking about his own people, he's admitting that they are not being faithful to YAWEH.

Jonah is no longer the champion of Israelite Nationalism; instead he is admitting the unfaithfulness of his people and owning it for himself.

Let me read some more of Solomon's prayer for you...

⁴⁸ and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; ⁴⁹ then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. ⁵⁰ And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you,

This is what Jonah is doing... but there's more!

Solomon had also prayed that when foreigners “*come and pray toward this temple,*”⁴³ *then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.*”

YAWEH's choosing of the nation of Israel was never supposed to be about nationalistic exclusivism – they were chosen to be a light to the Gentiles, so that as YAWEH had promised Abraham so many years before – through his descendents all nations would be blessed – not excluded!

So not only is Jonah admitting and turning away from covenant unfaithfulness, he is also turning towards YAWEH's evangelistic purpose in choosing Israel to shine his light to the nations.

So Jonah concludes his prayer professing that salvation comes from YAWEH, and YAWEH has the fish spew Jonah out - alive and ready to make good on his vows of thanksgiving.

So friends what can we take away from Jonah's prayer for our own life?

Well, there are the points we've mentioned already...

about not playing chicken with YAWEH, of trusting that YAWEH can reach us even when we are in the depths of death, and that transformation and heart change in people's lives is not instantaneous – it takes time.

But mostly I think we need to see that it is through death that we are brought back into a right relationship with YAWEH.

That part of us which doesn't want to hear YAWEH speak to us, doesn't want to give up what is comfortable, safe, easy, pleasant and follow YAWEH's son Jesus Christ as a disciple,

That part of us which rebels, and bucks and kicks against the prompting of the Holy Spirit... and says I'd rather die than surrender my entire life to YAWEH's plan for me...

That part of us needs to die...

Jesus Christ took that part of our human nature and put it to death on the cross, and this morning we want to pray that the Holy Spirit would work in our lives so that what Jesus accomplished would become more and more a reality in our daily lives.

That we would die to our sin – and become alive towards Jesus Christ – the living temple of YAWEH!

That we would be faithful and loyal to Christ as his followers, keep him first in our lives and turn towards his purpose in calling us to be his disciples – to make other disciples... of all nations!

Friends – the prayer of Jonah calls us to die to ourselves, and that is something you won't regret.

Let's pray...