

A Fishy Prayer
Jonah 2

Brothers and Sisters, have you ever instantly regretted something... when the realization of what you have actually just done suddenly hits you.

For example maybe you are starting to get fed up with your work situation, because you hate your job to start with – you only do it because you need something to pay the bills.

And it feels like your supervisor or your boss is always finding ways to make your life difficult – and this morning she came into your office and informed you that you'll need to stay late and redo some work that someone on your team has messed up – or you can take it home and work on it from there, but either way she needs it done by 8am tomorrow morning...

You try to protest but she says “it’s your problem, not mine.”

And now you’re sitting behind your desk fuming about it. And you are steamed, boy are you mad – your frustration with

work has been building up for too long now and you suddenly decide that you’re not going to take it anymore.

You feel like marching into HER office and tell her that It’s HER problem – not yours, you aren’t going to take this, she can get someone else to do this stupid paperwork, that you won’t be staying late tonight or taking it home, and she can find someone else to do it instead!

So you barge into her office and let her have a piece of your mind – you issue your ultimatum and she listens very calmly... Then she picks up her phone and calls HR to ask if they can send in a temp starting this afternoon - 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?!”

And friends, this morning as we listen to Jonah praying to Yahweh in the belly of the fish I think we can hear some of that instant regret at having decided to be thrown overboard into the sea instead of repenting and going to Nineveh.

If you remember Jonah was pretty wound up about what YAWEH had told him to do, and he had essentially decided that he would **never** go and preach to Nineveh, they did not deserve God's grace, and as I pointed out last week when Jonah says "*throw me overboard*" he is really saying "*I'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, when the realization sets in that when he goes under the next time – he won't be coming back up.

From what I read in the starting line of his prayer I believe that every fiber of his being is filled with regret as the realization of what he's actually done sinks in. (no pun intended)

Brothers and sisters – we won't win when we play chicken with God. When His Word confronts us about something and our reaction to it is that we say we would rather _____ or die than obey – God won't blink and back down... and we'll end up with a case of instant regret.

This just goes to show us how deeply Sin affects us right? That we would do something so foolish as issue ultimatums to the uncreated Almighty God who is creator of all things!

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 perhaps some of us would fear death by drowning more than others...

But to the ancient mind – to Jonah’s mind - the Sea wasn’t just a large body of water; it was the realm of chaos – it was all that was unpredictable and unknown and uncontrollable.

The sea embodied all the terror and fear the ancient’s had that their lives and their civilization could be easily and quickly be overthrown by an unexpected natural disaster generated by evil spiritual powers. They feared the sea in the same way we fear climate change and it’s potential to destroy the world.

The Sea revealed the limits of the ancient god’s power, while legends would tell how they had defeated the forces of chaos and brought order to the cosmos which allowed humanity to exist – they hadn’t been able to eliminate chaos.

At best they had confined chaos in one place - the sea, and set its boundaries to keep the sea and chaos in its place.

But it 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 unleash chaos and destruction on humanity.

And if you remember the destruction in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina’s storm surge, or what Hurricane Sandy did to New York and New Jersey, or how in 2004 a massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean claimed over 160,000 lives - we begin to get a sense of how the ancients viewed the sea and what they feared in it.

And it’s important to know this because it helps us understand that when Jonah realizes he’s going to die, he also realizes that He is going to die in a place where it was believed that God was absent; a terrible place beyond God’s reach where there were monsters and terrors.

So brothers and sisters Jonah realizes he is dying... and that he was going to Hell.

And if we were watching it on film we'd probably see Jonah sinking down... into the darkness of the abyss below and then out of that darkness we begin to see something moving and taking 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 what do we make of this – it certainly doesn't look like a rescue – it looks more like Jonah has met his end by drowning and being eaten.

But, the scripture reveals to us that 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.

As Psalm 139:8 says *“If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”*

Brothers and sisters 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... has become our Psyche.

What the ancients feared about the Sea, we moderns fear about our inner psychological state and mental health. We fear how it can come undone, how it can overwhelm us and throw our life into turmoil. We fear what might lurk inside us and how we might not be able to suppress it or control it.

And it's not a matter of if - but when we will have to face our inner depths and the darkness inside us when we are confronted by a disaster, a death, or something that shakes us to the core of who we are - it may even be something that is brought on by our own sinfulness and fleeing from what God's Word is saying to us and confronting us about.

And the truth that YAWEH sends a fish to swallow Jonah in the depths of the sea is a reminder to us that God 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 hand and in His will when we aren't able to hold on to Him, or perhaps don't want to...

And we need to know this brothers and sisters, so that we are equipped and encouraged and enabled to begin to recognize YAWEH's presence and work in those dark circumstances, when we aren't sure if we feel dead or alive, and we can start to recognize what he is doing in us and working in us that this is not an instantaneous process, it takes some time.

In Jonah's case it was after three days and three nights and then he began to pray in co-operation with what God was doing with him in the depths of the sea.

But, please understand – and this is important to know in order to apply what we learn here to our own situations – the phrase 3 days and 3 nights is often used in the bible to specify

that YAWEH had allowed exactly the right amount of time had pass in order to facilitate what He had intended to occur – maybe that was specifically 72 hours but that is not the point.

The amount of chronological time which it takes to effect transformation and heart change is not the focus; instead what's important is that we realize that God will use chronological time to bring about a kairos time – and that teaches us that God's work in us is not instantaneous.

Our regret might be – but God's transformation work is not.

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 to God's Word finally dies in the belly of that fish... and he prays to YAWEH 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? People will say all sorts of things to save their own skin.

Well brothers and sisters 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 their situations and circumstance when they are not able to do so.

And that's another encouragement to us friends. When our inner life is in turmoil, when we are in the depths of despair and depression, when our thoughts and feelings are not under our control anymore and we are not able to generate our own thoughts and feelings as proof of our faith in Christ – the Psalms and other scriptures can be the authentic response that we need to pray to God, to connect to Christ, when we are not able to form our own responses.

The Psalms can give voice to our feelings when we're not sure exactly what to say because we come to the end of ourselves and our own resources.

The Psalms give us the very words to help us respond to what YAWEH has allowed to come to pass in our life. We need to remember this and be reminded of this and simply... do this.

It's what Jonah is doing... and his quotation of the phrase "Towards your holy temple" in vs. 4 and 7 is what reveals to us that he's had a change of heart.

Jonah is taking this phrase from King Solomon's dedication prayer for the Temple in 1 Kings 8:48 "*toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name*"

Now this is significant for Jonah – remember... he is from the Northern Kingdom, and Jerusalem and the Temple are in the south, in the rival kingdom of Judah.

The Northern Kings had set up an alternative religion and 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”* (vs. 8)

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 northern 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... *“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; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you..” (1 Kings 8:48-50)

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

Solomon had also prayed in vs. 42-43 that when foreigners *“come and pray toward this temple, 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 repenting of covenant unfaithfulness, he is also turning towards YAWEH's evangelistic purpose in choosing Israel to shine his light to the nations.

He is submitting to and embracing God's Word to him to go and preach to Nineveh, and to bring them God's grace.

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...

That we mustn't play chicken with YAWEH, that we can trust YAWEH can reach us even when we are in the depths of death in whatever form that takes, and that transformation and heart change takes time, it's not instantaneous.

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, that wants to disobey and flee from God's Word where it is confronting us...

That part of us which rebels, and bucks and kicks against the prompting of the Holy Spirit or the truth about who God is in the scripture... the part of us that says I'd rather die than be obedient - brothers and sisters, that part of us needs to die so that we can be in a right relationship with Yahweh.

And this is what we need learn from Jonah's prayer, and it is also how this part of Jonah's story leads us to Jesus Christ.

Because it was Jesus Christ who took that on part of our human nature, that rebellious, unbelieving, God-resisting and fleeing part, and put it to death on the cross – that is the Good News about Jesus brothers and sisters! Hear it and believe it and trust in it!

Scripture testifies to this in 2 Corinthians 5:21 where it says *“God made him who had no sin... [Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

So brothers and sisters – what is being said here is that the way in which human nature is affected by sin so that we flee from God, rebel and disobey Him – or just plain ignore Him...

That has been put to death on the cross so that the human nature of Jesus is fully cooperative with God – and that new human nature is being given to us, more and more, as the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus Christ - that’s what it means that *“we become the righteousness of God”*

And what amazing and awesome and encouraging news this is for us – as I said last week *“we WILL be changed!”* We are going to be made like Jesus Christ!

But as the Holy Spirit does this friends, we are going to experience the death of the old part or parts of ourselves that are the opposite to how Jesus is, that resist and buck against

the Word of God... they cannot co-exist. Do you understand that?

This is what Paul is explaining when he says in 2 Corinthians 4:11 *“For we who live (who have the Holy Spirit working to renew us) are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”*

So brothers and sisters; receive this encouragement and exhortation; do not dread any manifestation of death you encounter, do not worry about being swallowed and consumed by anxiety, do not fear the places where God seems to be absent.

They will not defeat us or harm us in any permanent capacity; instead they will only serve to activate the eternal and everlasting life of Jesus that the Holy Spirit has put into us.

It’s almost like a proof test, we can only know we are sealed for immortality and we have received everlasting life by going

through death – and in that death, our old nature dies, and Christ’s new nature is revealed us - more clearly and brightly.

When we encounter these situations in our lives, we can be assured that God’s plan for us is right on track - we are delivered to death for Jesus’ sake so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal bodies – not just in the future, but right now!

Now if you are not sure that you have the life of Christ in you, please come and find me after the service and we can pray to have the Holy Spirit fill you with Christ’s life!

Brothers and sisters, it was only through Jonah experiencing the depths of the place where God was thought to be absent, and being swallowed by the terror of the deep that his sinful resistance to Yahweh died - and the true purpose of His calling as an Israelite and a prophet shone forth instead.

So brothers and sisters, my prayer this morning is that the Yahweh will use the trials and the challenges and struggles

we’ve gone through this past year to kill our resistance to His Word – and when that resistance dies the life of Christ will begin to manifest itself in us, as a willing desire to GO OUT and be obedient to His command that we make disciples.

As our Lord Jesus said in John 12:24 “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

So brothers and sisters, the prayer of Jonah calls us to die to ourselves, for the sake of others, that they might hear the good news about Jesus and receive His grace and forgiveness... and this is something we will not regret!

Amen.

Let’s pray...