

2. True repentance and God's mercy

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One of our elders, Jerry Hamby somehow thinks that I was such a trouble maker when I was in high school in Seoul, Korea. To his surprise, I was a perfect model student with exceptional grades. NOT!!! The only reason why I didn't get into further troubles and remained as a semi-human being was because of my strict and no non-sense daddy with enormously big hands.

Let's face it, folks. It is no fun that we have to get disciplined by God, parents or even civil authority like getting pulled over for speeding. Spiritually, it is up to us how we respond to God's disciplines we get. We can choose to continue with our attitude and get more spankings or repent quickly and learn from our sins and run to our loving Father's arms that would embrace us.

In chapter 1, we find this rebellious prophet Jonah running away from God because he doesn't like what God is going to do the people of Nineveh. Jonah wanted them to be judged by the wrath of God, but he knew the Lord is full of mercy. Because of his own rebellion, he ended up being tossed overboard from the ship into the open mouth of a great fish that prepared to swallow Jonah alive. After that, "dive, dive, dive."

What happens when God wants a person to do something, but the person doesn't want to do it? The Book of Jonah shows us that God has a way of bringing us to the place where we become obedient to what He wants. That is one of the important principles about the sovereignty of God.

A. THE STRANGEST PRAYER MEETING

Jonah 2:1-2 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly. 2 And he said: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, And He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice.

After slogging around inside of the fish for days, Jonah thought about his current condition and decided it is the time to pray to God. Here in chapter 2, we find Jonah running to God. So he decided to have the strangest prayer meeting right in the belly of the fish. We had a sweet time at the Men's Prayer Breakfast at the Suttons yesterday morning. I am glad that it was not in the fish's stomach.

Some of the different versions of the Bible have either the word "sheol" which is hell or "grave". Either way it means death.

I am sure that you all heard from someone that they don't mind going to hell and have a major P-A-R-T-Y with their drinking buddies. The truth from the Bible says otherwise. There won't be any party in hell, it will be a complete and total separation from God with unspeakable torment. What Jonah was going through in the belly of the fish was close to hell.

Did you noticed that the majority of Jonah's prayer was quoted out of the Book of Psalms? Some say, "I don't know how to pray well." There is no secret of the method in praying. After all, it is conversation between God and us, so we should pray the way we talk to someone whom we love. Use His word to remind His promises from the Bible to Him. God loves to hear that His children are depending on His promises.

However, Jonah's prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It's doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, because our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict.

Jonah still wasn't happy with the will of God. In chapter 1, he was afraid of the will of God and rebelled against it, but now he wants God's will simply because it's the only way out of his dangerous position. Like too many people today, Jonah saw the will of God as something to turn to in an emergency, not something to live by every day of one's life.

As the Lord dropped Jonah into the depths, He was reminding him of what the people of Nineveh were going through in their sinful condition: they were helpless and hopeless.

Prayer is one of the constant miracles of the Christian life. To think that our God is so great He can hear the cries of millions of people from around the world at the same time and deal with their needs personally. God is able to provide for all His children, no matter where they are or what their needs may be. We can pray to Him from anywhere, anytime in any condition. The best part of the whole thing is that He listens to His children's prayers and answers according to His perfect will.

By the way, can you imagine the fish story Jonah would tell his friends? "Once I was caught by this big fish."

B. MY PRAYER TO GOD'S HOLY TEMPLE

Jonah 2:3-7 For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. 4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' 5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. 7 "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; And my prayer went up to You, Into Your holy temple.

What kept Jonah alive in the pitch dark belly of the fish? His faith in God's promise. Which promise? The promise that involves his prayer going up to God's holy temple.

When King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked God for this special favor in 1 Kings 8:38-40.

1 Kings 8:38-40 whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: 39 then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), 40 that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.

Jonah claimed that promise. By faith, he looked toward God's temple.

Can you picture Jonah in the belly of the fish? Seaweed wrapped around him. Probably he looked like a gigantic California roll.

C. SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

Jonah 2:8-9 "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord."

Now Jonah admits that there were idols in his life that robbed him of the blessing of God. An idol is anything that takes away from God the affection and obedience that rightfully belong only to Him. One such idol was Jonah's intense nationalism and a concern for his own reputation which we are going to find out in chapter 4.

Jonah knows that his salvation is of the Lord. He also now knows it in the big picture. Salvation is not of a nation of Israel or a race of Hebrews, or not of man of himself at all. Salvation is of the Lord and salvation belongs to our God.

It is easy for us to think that we should drop nuclear bombs in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran to remove all those extreme Muslim terrorists and make those countries to be parking lots. But what about many lives who don't know Jesus Christ as no more than an ancient Jewish teacher? They need Jesus, too. They need salvation from the Lord like once we were. We need to pray for their salvation.

Jonah truly repented and God set him free.

D. THE MOST UNIQUE WAY TO ESCAPE FROM THE FISH

Jonah 2:10 So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. God spoke to the fish and the fish didn't resist the will of God like we often do.

Sometimes we don't have much of a choice about how God will deliver us. Jonah should be appreciated that God didn't use another choice.

Jonah's deliverance came after three days and nights had passed, providing a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection.

Matthew 12:40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

E. THE MARVEL OF AN UNDESERVED COMMISSION

Jonah 3:1-4 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

In chapter 3, we now find this prophet is running with God. Jonah made the first amphibious landing in human kind. When He was called to go to Nineveh this time, I don't see an ounce of resistance in Jonah's part. He had learned a lesson.

This also shows the amazing love of God to His wayward people. Though Jonah did everything he could to resist the first call of God, after Jonah repented God called him again – though God was under no obligation to do it. He did it out of mercy and grace. Jonah is being offered a new beginning.

God wants to use us – stumbling, falling and all – but He won't do so if we refuse to get up.

The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. When we fall, the enemy wants us to believe that our ministry is ended and there's no hope for recovery, but our God is the God of the second chance.

Micah 7:8 Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, The Lord will be a light to me.

We don't know if there is more to Jonah's message for the people of Nineveh. I can assure you that Jonah was not doing this assignment with delight, but because of obligation to God.

Four times in this book, Nineveh is called a "great city" and archeologists tell us that the description is well-deserved. It was also great in size. The area of the city and its suburbs was sixty miles, and from the Lord's statement in Jonah 4:11, we could guess that there were probably over 600,000 people living in that area.

F. THE MARVEL OF AN UNPARALLELED AWAKENING

Jonah 3:5-10 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? 10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

Repentance begins with believing God and what He says in the Bible. As we believe Him and His Word, we have the power to transform our lives as He wills.

Repentance has hope in the mercy and love of God. It hopes that God will relent and that the repentant people will not perish.

It is not that difficult for us to imagine the reaction from the people of Nineveh when they saw Jonah and heard his message. His skin and all the hair would be bleached and discolored by the gastric acid juice from the fish's belly. On top of it, He was yelling, "Repent, or you are going to be dead meat." I bet it was very convincing.

Like the sailors in the storm, the Ninevites didn't want to perish. Their fasting and praying and their humbling of themselves before God, sent a message to heaven, but the people of Nineveh had no assurance that they would be saved. They hoped that God's great compassion would move Him to change His plan and spare the city.

Some of you have KJV and love it. It is a great version, but it is not the only authorized version that every Christian must use. Some Christians who are filled with nothing more than pride declare that KJV is the only Spirit filled version and if you use any other versions, you are reading the devil's version. As I said, their concept is from their own pride. KJV is good, but not perfect. Jonah 3:10 is a case in point.

Jonah 3:10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. KJV

The phrase "God repented" might better be translated "God relented," that is, changed His plan. From the human point of view, it looked like repentance, but from the divine perspective, it was simply God's response to man's change of heart. God is utterly consistent with Himself. It only appears that He is changing His mind.

One of the attributes of God is that He is immutable, which means that He never changes. There is no reason for God to change. He knows the end from the beginning. The Bible uses human analogies to reveal the divine character of God. That is what we call 'anthropomorphic' terms.

G. APPLICATIONS

- 1) We can pray to our God from anywhere, anytime in any condition. The best part of the whole thing is that He listens to His children's prayers and answers according to His perfect will.
- 2) God wants to use us – stumbling, falling and all – but He won't do so if we refuse to get up.
- 3) The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. When we fall, the enemy wants us to believe that our ministry is ended and there's no hope for recovery, but our God is the God of the second chance.
- 4) Repentance begins with believing God and what He says in the Bible. As we believe Him and His Word, we have the power to transform our lives as He wills.