

The Lord Answers

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening everyone. Thanks Sabine for reading the passage this evening. It would be good for you to have that passage open in front of you as we go through it together. Now, let me just ask you a rhetorical question before we get started.

When things in your life are difficult, or things in your life are challenging, what or where is your first port of call? Now, the book of Jonah could be described as a great comeback story. And the Bible is full of great comeback stories, isn't it?

I mean, in fact, there's a book called The Prodigal Prophet written by Tim Keller on the book of Jonah. And there's remarkable similarities between the parable of the prodigal son and the book of Jonah.

But we like hearing about comebacks, don't we? Like we find it encouraging, and we find it uplifting. And we might even shed the odd tear at a comeback story that maybe tweaks at the heartstrings. And the Bible's full of stories of people who were down and getting back up. And that's only made possible because of God's intervention. So our theme through the book of Jonah is the Lord saves.

[1 : 0 9] And here we see him in action in this chapter as he rescues Jonah. And it's not because of anything that Jonah's done, because he certainly doesn't deserve it. But God rescues him, and he makes the comeback possible.

God in his righteousness and authority, with the power to save and the power to rescue. And it's his grace that provides salvation for Jonah.

Now, this is actually a first for me. You write devotions or give your testimony or lead Bible studies. But actually taking time to delve into a passage and preach, this is a first for me.

And when Alistair asked me, probably quite a number of months ago now, I thought, 27th of March? That's miles away. I've got loads of time. That time has kind of collapsed on me.

But it's new for me. But when he asked me if I wanted to do it, I was probably a little bit slower to accept than I should have been. I don't know what you're like, but when someone suggests to me that you should do something that takes you out of your comfort zone, I'm a little bit reticent.

[2 : 1 4] I'm not one to embrace new opportunities quickly. And I usually prefer to consider and weigh things up before agreeing to do it. And I think it's funny that it just so happens that I felt like that.

And Alistair's asked me to preach on the book of Jonah. But I'd maybe go a little bit further than that, actually, and as we look at Jonah tonight, and we delve into him a little bit further, we'll maybe recognize that there's actually something of Jonah probably in each of us.

You see, I think what we see with Jonah is that he has a head knowledge, but not a heart understanding of God's grace and forgiveness. And so what we have here in chapter 2 is a study of a sinner in desperate need of God's grace.

And it should act as a reminder to us that none of us should feel the same level of pride and ignorance towards others. Now, this scene in chapter 2 is one of these Bible stories that most adults, even if they're not Christians, will have heard and they'll remember.

But they're maybe not able to recall what went before it or what went after it. But when they were young, our two used to watch VeggieTales videos. And there's a clue to giving away my age that I'm talking about videos and not DVDs or live streaming through Netflix or Amazon.

[3 : 3 1] But anyway, one of the videos was called Jonah and the Pirates. And it would have known that you could teach the gospel to children through cartoon characters dressed as peas and carrots and aubergines and the like.

And it's pretty effective and it's not as daft as it might sound. And the songs really get stuck in your head. And as I'm telling you all of this, I can hear one of the tunes in my head right now called,

We're the pirates who don't do anything.

But when Archie was talking last week, one of the reasons that Jonah was fleeing from the Lord was that he had categorized the Ninevites as the worst of sinners. And therefore, in Jonah's mind, he'd limited God in his ability to reach out to all people.

Well, I can see something of that in myself at times. Perhaps in the way in which the sin of others is categorized in my head as perhaps worse than any sin that I might commit.

And I think that, of course, leads you into thinking that perhaps the grace of God and the forgiveness that he offers is not so deserving for some as it is for others. Well, I think that's an application point for us, isn't it?

[4 : 37] That danger of a head knowledge but not a heart understanding. See, I think Jonah's lost sight of the fact that God wants all people to know and love him and therefore truth and forgiveness is available for all who hear and are prepared to believe in God.

Jonah, having pledged his life to God, now ends up spending his time avoiding the very God that he set out to serve. And you might already have discovered that strange contradiction in your own Christian life.

While confessing a love for Christ, you find yourself turning from him. While trusting Christ, you might battle with fear and anxiety. And while serving Christ, you sometimes struggle with disappointment about certain events in your life.

Well, I don't think you're alone. So here we are, then, at the start of chapter 2 with Jonah in the belly of the fish. And I think it's only right that we give this part of the chapter the weight that the book gives it.

Now, Archie referenced it last week as the elephant or the fish in the room. And how do we attempt to explain it? Or do we even try? In his overview a couple of weeks ago, Alistair referenced the fact that this is a four-chapter book with 48 verses.

[5 : 55] Yet the fish is only actually mentioned once at the end of chapter 1 and again at the end of chapter 2. And crucially, and please see this, they include the phrases, The Lord provided and the Lord commanded.

And as hard as it might be to rationalize it, I think we focus on those words provided and commanded. Because this is the same God, isn't it, that created and stilled the storm.

So I think he's more than capable of providing a fish to achieve his purposes. Surely for God, the creator, this miraculous event, because that's what it is, is not beyond his capability.

And we shouldn't limit our view of God by seeking to somehow rationalize this event in any other way. And I think if we focus on the how, here we risk missing the point of why God acts in this way as the rescuer for the undeserving Jonah.

So Jonah's been swallowed and he spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Why? Three days and three nights? Why is that particularly significant?

[7 : 03] Well, I just think it's a foretelling of what must happen to Jesus in the period of time between his death and resurrection. And Jesus himself referred to these events with Jonah as historical fact.

And a miraculous sign of God's deliverance. So what we have now in chapter 2 is Jonah's prayer. And it seems to include this pivotal turning point in his attitude, which leads to God's command to the fish to spit them out rather unceremoniously onto dry land in a pool of fishy vomit.

Nice. But we'll just go back and take a moment here and just try and think what the reality here for Jonah was. And we'll try and imagine what that must have been like.

He's been swallowed. He believes that he's going to die. He is surrounded by darkness, sliminess, no doubt a pretty shocking smell, and a complete sense of having no way out of his current predicament.

So we find Jonah here completely at rock bottom. And that got me to thinking what my rock bottom might be. Like, have you ever felt completely overcome in situations or perhaps felt there was no way out of your current predicament?

[8 : 22] And thresholds are different for everyone, right? I mean, maybe it's the implications of failed exams, bereavement, relationship difficulties with your partner, job difficulties, money, difficult family life, feelings of guilt.

The list goes on. You know, being human is not easy. And I don't think at any point the Christian faith offers an easy ride. So as we go through this chapter, here's six things.

I've got to remember to hold up two hands for this. Six things that I want you to see from this prayer, which tell us more about what God can do than the words that Jonah uses. Now, I know it's probably traditional to have a three-point sermon, but we'll just call this a double club card points deal, and we'll go for six.

So number one, how we pray. Jonah begins, In my distress, I... So how would you finish that sentence?

Sometimes it's easy to look at these Old Testament characters and think that, I couldn't be like them. But when you actually get stuck into the relevant scriptures, you quickly see that they were ordinary folk in the sense that they were imperfect and prone to making mistakes.

[9 : 33] Yet, God uses them anyway. And they really knew how to pray, and they were honest with God as they prayed. You see, God is not some cosmic distant thing.

He's our Father who knitted us together, and He knows how we feel. So, if you are taking notes today, just jot down Psalm 139 and read it at your leisure.

And read for yourself about the God who's all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, and present everywhere. And let that just sink in and be a reassuring truth for you.

You know, what I've been reminded of as I've studied this book is that Jonah's prayer resembles many prayers that we read in the Psalms. And I think that this indicates that Jonah really knew his scriptures.

And when he was struggling for the right words to use, and the right words to pray, he remembered the words used by others. Just as a couple of examples, we can look through Psalm 18 and 30, and we can see great similarities between the words used by the psalmist, and the words in Jonah's prayer.

[10 : 40] Indicating that Jonah, in this moment, was recounting what he knew from Scripture. And as Jonah's doing with this prayer, when we're struggling, and we just can't find the words, we can use someone else's words and revert to Scripture.

You see, Jesus taught about prayer, didn't he, when he was laying out the Lord's Prayer. That your Father knows what you need before you ask him. And the Lord's Prayer was given by Jesus as a template, almost, to his followers on how they should pray.

And Jesus himself hit rock bottom, of course. His friends had deserted him. Enemies had gathered. He was condemned to death, beaten, tortured, nailed to a cross.

And at that point, what did he pray? We just read Psalm 22, and we can see the words that Jesus used when he prayed. See, Jonah's disobedience causes him to feel real separation from God.

And if we look through verses 2 through to 4, we've got all the aquatic analogies. He's deep in the realm of the dead. He's deep in the realm of the dead. Hurling into the depths. Into the very heart of the sea, and the currents swirled about me.

[11 : 56] All your waves and breakers swept over me. Jonah believes himself to have been banished from God's sight. Now, if I could be honest at this point, I'd say that at various times in my Christian faith, I've felt distant from God.

Not particularly engaged. But what we've seen with Jonah is that it's his pride and stubbornness to do things his own way that have meant that there's been parts of his life that he's not been willing to give over to God.

And he's wanted to retain control for himself. Well, that resonates with me. I don't know if that resonates with you.

For me, I can look back and think that it's at times only ever been me that's created distance from God. Like, he hasn't moved. But I have. I've made choices to neglect prayer, or Bible reading, or study.

Maybe even fellowship. Not invested time into the relationship. And I just wonder how quickly our human relationships would go south if we took the same approach. But importantly, perhaps attitudes like that make us indifferent towards others.

[13 : 10] Maybe even hostile. And we're prevented from having the compassionate heart that God wants us to have. It's certainly led me at times to experiencing an inconsistency in my relationship with God.

But it's been one that's been entirely of my own making. See, I think our hearts only begin to change when we recognize God's grace. Because that is what drives our compassion towards others.

I wonder if, like Jonah, it sometimes takes a bitter or even painful experience to get us to that point of dependence. Now, you can read lots of commentaries on Jonah too.

And lots of commentaries say that this is a good example of a prayer to follow. And in some ways we can look at it and think that it is a good prayer. But I think what makes the prayer great actually is not what Jonah says, but what we can learn from God about it.

Therefore, I think that means we can have confidence that God hears our prayers almost despite the specific words that we use. Because he's more interested in the heart that lies behind it.

[14 : 22] So number two, God answers the prayers of his people. Jonah cries out in his distress and in verse 6, recognizes that you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.

So this is not some insignificant deity or idol that the pagans may worship like the sailors on the boat. Like he's interested in us and he's sovereign and powerful.

And let me just read this from 1 John chapter 5. And it's just a couple of verses, verses 14 to 15. This is the confidence which we have before him.

That if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we've asked from him.

Now we've just finished a series in the evening services, haven't we, on the characteristics of God. And we've been reminded about his eternal and overflowing love and his personal knowledge of us and interest in every detail of our lives.

[15 : 28] Now maybe, like me, in the past you might have been frustrated or perhaps even discouraged that the expectations of having prayers answered sometimes don't match the timing that God might have in mind.

But we need to be reminded of the promises of God and that his wisdom far exceeds our own. Remembering that he is the creator, but we are created beings in his image.

So he sees the whole picture and we only maybe see the odd brush stroke. So we must trust, therefore, that his answers are the best possible solutions. So number three, God answers prayers in spite of our sin.

Jonah's not experiencing some spiritual high here. He is in spiritual decline and his predicament is as a direct result of his disobedience.

His preference was to drown rather than be obedient and go to Nineveh. And even before that, we saw on the boat that the sailors were praying while Jonah remained silent. But he didn't want to pray because he knew that he was in disobedience.

[16 : 35] And I think this is what makes the answer to prayer so significant. Because Jonah's done nothing to deserve God's grace and forgiveness, but yet that is exactly what happens.

So I take that as an encouragement. If you're sitting here tonight, and I don't know what people's personal circumstances are, but if you're sitting here tonight and you think somehow that you're not good enough to come before God in prayer, or believe that what you've done in the past somehow despise you from being in relationship with God, or maybe you're living in a way that's not God-honoring, can I just encourage you to look at Jonah?

I mean, this guy couldn't be in a worse predicament than he is right now, but yet we see this amazing example of God's compassion and grace, that even in Jonah's shame and disgrace, God can use him to his glory.

And that got me to thinking about wondering maybe how many times I've used my sinful behaviors and attitudes as self-made barriers that prevent us from coming to the Lord in prayer.

See, I think what we see in this section of the book of Jonah is that the depths of God's grace are deeper than the roots of Jonah's disobedience.

[17 : 58] I mean, he might be where he is as a result of God's judgment for the sin that he's committed, but it's the same God who's holy and judges sin, is also the same God that shows compassion, mercy, and forgiveness to all who believe in him.

Now, that is the wonderful message of the Christian faith, isn't it? And it's so perfectly encapsulated in the song Amazing Grace by John Newton. Now, I'm sure that you'll all know the story of how that song came to be written, but if you don't, I would encourage you to look it up as an example of how and who God saves.

So, number four, then, God answers our prayers in spite of his judgment. Through verses 3 to 5, Jonah recognizes God's hand in his predicament, and the second half of verse 6, Jonah can see the salvation that God offers.

But there is a consequence to suffer for his disobedience, and Jonah appeals to the God whose hand is set against them. So, I think there's an application point for us here, that God is gracious, and while he disciplines those that he loves, it comes from that place of wanting to bring us back to him.

And the wonderful truth of the gospel message is that God provides salvation and deliverance instead of judgment and condemnation for those who call on him. He corrects his people so that they can live the life that they're called to live.

[19 : 27] And again, if you're taking notes, just jot down a couple of scripture references. Hebrews 12, 4 to 11, Ephesians 2, 1 to 9.

And just read in your own time a bit more about how God disciplines those he loves, and how through God's grace we're made alive through Jesus Christ. Number five, we're almost there. God answers our prayers in spite of our misplaced pride. Now, you can look at verse 7 as a pivotal verse, as the point where Jonah remembers the Lord as his life is ebbing away.

And then in verse 8, his recognition of the foolishness of idol worship, and his statements that he's going to shout praise, make sacrifices, and make good what he's vowed. And it is a pivotal turning point, because he's now trying to put his life back, point it back towards God.

But maybe this is just my interpretation of the prayer. But there's a lot of I in there, isn't there? Like, I can't help but feel that perhaps Jonah thinks that the reason God has answered his prayer is because he prayed in the first place.

[20 : 36] Meaning that he thinks that he's done something to deserve what God is about to deliver. So I had to read this prayer over and over, and then realize that there actually isn't much expression of remorse or regret on Jonah's part.

And again, I can't help but feel that Jonah now thinks that he's on the right footing with God because of the fact that he prayed in his desperation. Now, that is clearly to be encouraged, but in and of itself, it is not justification for what God is going to do.

So here's a question. Do we believe that God answers our prayers based on the good things that we do? See, it's important for us to recognize that God will save us through his grace and not because of anything that we may do or not do to deserve it.

His response is one filled with mercy and grace. And where do we see that? In its fullness. Through the life and death of Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice for us on the cross.

See, I think there's also an issue to address here that Jonah appears to have forgotten why he is where he is and what got him there. You know, when Jonah was on the boat with the sailors and the boats going through the storm, what were the sailors doing?

[21 : 57] They were calling out to their gods for help. See, I think Jonah comes across as being quite self-righteous. That he now sits in judgment upon those sailors.

And I think, and it's just an interpretation, but I think he's basically saying, those sailors, they are so stupid, like they worship and cling to worthless idols that can't save them.

I told them about you, God, and they prayed to you, but you and I both know that they're going to return to their false idols. They'll never learn. See, Jonah talks about those idol worshippers forfeiting the grace that could be theirs.

But yet, he seems to have missed the message of God's grace, that God is keeping him alive when he should be dead. That God's been more gracious to him than he deserves, but yet he still cannot be gracious to others.

And in thinking of the task of preaching God's word to the people of Nineveh, and we'll get to that in the other two chapters, it's a bit like he's also saying, God, look, they're idolaters too.

[23 : 08] Like, they might turn, they might not, but even if they do, they're just going to go back to their idols. You don't understand them, God. They're a hopeless cause. And then that got me to thinking about people in my life that I might view as hopeless.

And I don't mean that in an unkind sense, but in the sense of thinking that God will never be able to get through to them. So in my head, I'm already limiting God's ability to make breakthroughs into people's life.

Do you recognize that? Is this the feeling we sometimes have towards others, friends, family? Work colleagues, neighbors? See, I think this is teaching us that we need to consider and remember that the only reasons that we are Christians in the first place is because God accepted us for who we are in all our sinfulness.

And it has nothing to do with anything that we've done. Our salvation as believers is only secure because God was gracious to us. And perhaps, as uncomfortable as that might make us feel, we might actually be the vehicle by which others hear the gospel, however difficult that might be for you.

Now I found this quote in preparation for tonight. I'm just going to read it. Let me say that again.

[24 : 39] Any genuine step of faith in the right direction is more than compensated by God's grace to cover all of our deficiencies. That's encouraging, isn't it?

And finally, God answers our prayers to make us merciful and gracious. You see, steadfast love can only be found in God, not fleeting and temporary idols that leave us wanting.

They're changeable and unreliable, unlike God's love expressed in its fullness through Jesus.

Jesus, three days and three nights, mirrored in Jonah's experience.

And because of what Jesus has done for us, there is hope in the steadfast love that God offers, no matter the depths of our sin. God in love corrects his people so they can live a life that they're called to live as believers.

And that should fill us with gratitude and our lives be marked as one in which there's a desire to be compassionate and caring to others and share the good news of the gospel that we worship a loving God who saves.

[25 : 53] So we can say that Jonah's recommitted his life to God and we'll see what lies ahead of him in the next chapters. He has a heart transformed and now moves to compassion for the Ninevites, but we'll see that it's not all plain sailing for him.

But at least he now seems to be pointing in the right direction. See, Jonah's prayer warns us, I think, of spiritual superficiality and it reminds us that God's method of saving us isn't always the method that we would have chosen.

Do you know, perhaps Jonah might have preferred a dramatic search effort with Coast Guard ships or helicopters, divers, so he might have wanted television coverage and piles of support letters as he recovered in hospital and a high-profile television interview once he gets out of hospital.

But God didn't choose to do it that way because one of Jonah's main problems was pride. God the rescuer for the undeserving.

Do you know, perhaps if man had been left to choose a means of salvation, he wouldn't have chosen a way by which confession of your sins and believing and trusting in Jesus was enough.

[27 : 09] And of course, people tried to add things to it, like maybe good works or fantastic knowledge of Scripture or Bible knowledge.

But nevertheless, Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of God's plan to redeem mankind to himself and secure their eternal salvation. Now this is the only means.

And it's by his provision alone and God's grace that you may be saved. Why don't we pray? Father, we thank you that you loved us so much that you sent your Son to die for us.

A once and forever atoning sacrifice for our sins. Thank you that we can see your loving grace through how you rescued Jonah and will you help us as we seek to strengthen our relationship with you through prayer and being rooted in Scripture.

Lord, will you fill our hearts with compassion and a desire to share the good news of the Gospel.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[28 : 21] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.