

Praying With The Prayers Of The Bible:

The Prayer from the Depth of Despair (Read Jonah 2:2-9.)

Twice in the Bible there is a record of prayers prayed in hell. In Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the former prayed for both release from his torment and that a warning would be sent to his family (Luke 16:24-31).

Here in the book of Jonah this chapter opens with the words, 'Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God' (v.1) The prophet prayed from what he described as 'the belly of hell' (KJV), or 'from the depth of Sheol' (v.2). The first chapter of the book tells how Jonah was commissioned by God to go and preach in Ninevah, the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire. Instead Jonah ran away from his home country, from (he thought) the presence of God and from hearing God's command. The Assyrians had long been the all-conquering enemies of Israel and Jonah was either afraid to go to Ninevah, or he did not want them to hear God's word – or both. So he ran away and took ship for Tarshish (i.e. Spain). During a violent storm he confessed to the sailors that he had disobeyed God and reluctantly they threw him overboard (1:12-14). The Lord had 'appointed a great fish' which swallowed the prophet and from deep inside its belly, he prayed to the Lord. God heard Jonah's prayer, the fish spewed him out and his life was spared (2:10).

Jonah's prayer, prayed when he was sure he was about to die, has much to teach us about praying. First, even in our disobedience, God hears us when we pray humbly and sincerely. Jonah's terrible calamity was directly the result of his running away from God. It wasn't because of circumstances, it wasn't inevitable, it wasn't fate or just 'one of those things;' it was his disobedience brought about the disaster. How gracious God is! Even in our running away from him, He still loves us and hears our prayers.

Second, we can pray anywhere. If Jonah could cry to the Lord when, in his own words, 'in the heart of the seas,' when 'all the waves and billows' passed over him (v.3), how many places may we not find to come before the Lord in prayer? There is the quiet time at the day's beginning, a moment of reflection in a busy schedule, between meetings, as we drive the car or travel in the bus, or plane or ship – so many places where we can 'lift up our hearts' to the Lord.

Third, no situation is too difficult for God. The God who 'hurled a great wind upon the sea' (1:4), who 'appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah' (1:17); who prepared 'a plant' and 'a worm' to bring about his purposes (4:6,7), is the Sovereign Lord of earth and heaven. He can hear us and help us in our deepest distress, in the hours when life seems to be tumbling in all round us.

Fourth, the Lord can deliver! Jonah's prayer from the depth of hell ends with the ringing assurance, 'Deliverance belongs to the Lord' (2:9). We all need to hear that! Today, whatever our need, our pain, our disappointment, our fear, our weakness, our besetting sin – with the Lord there is deliverance.

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