

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
Hitting Rock Bottom

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Series: Jonah

Jonah 2

**BIG IDEA – JONAH RUNS UNTIL HE HITS ROCK BOTTOM, AND THEN HE LOOKS UP**

Good morning, Two Cities Church. One of the things we say around here is that we are the church for anybody, but we're not the church for everybody, and we're okay with that. It takes all types of churches to reach all types of people. Let me say it again. We're the church for anybody, but we're not the church for everybody.

But this is what you need to know if you are a Christian: every Christian needs a church, because the Christian life is not meant to be individualized and privatized; it's meant to be church-shaped. God created you so that you are shaped by the environments you put yourself in.

So, at the end of the summer and the beginning of the fall, one last time, I just want to invite you to get in. Families, I want to invite you to get your kids into our Kids ministry and our Students ministry. Get your kids into these environments. Middle schoolers and high schoolers, if I can speak to you for a moment, and sixth graders who are in here for the first time coming out of Kids ministry into our middle school ministry...

Guys, we are launching the Students ministry on Wednesday night. If you've never been, and you're in sixth grade to twelfth grade, I double dog dare you to go. Okay? You're going to have a great time. You can't know just going one time. I've told you already. My daughter is in the middle school ministry. I absolutely love it.

By the way, if you are new, the Weekender is for you. The Weekender is this coming weekend. Don't worry. Some of you are not early adopters. You don't want to be the first

to sign up. We have over 80 people signed up already. The Weekender is how you go from the crowd to the connected and committed.

I was reading an article this week about the temptations of churchgoers. You guys look like people who go to church, so this might be you. They said there are two temptations of a churchgoer. One is to be a critic. People like to be critics, because then they can distance themselves. "I don't want to be impacted by the message. I want to evaluate it. 'I didn't really like that song,'" or whatever it is.

The other temptation is to only consume. Look. We want you to consume. We want you to come here. We want you to receive. We want you to learn things. We want to serve you and impart things to you. But he said the temptation is when someone either comes as a critic or as a consumer and they don't ever experience the joy of meaningfully contributing.

So, let me invite you guys, at the beginning of the fall, to get in. I've told you so many times already, but we are headed into the most exciting, dare I say *epic*, fall we have ever had, and I just want to lock arms with as many of you as possible and put as much weight on our backs and climb the biggest hill we can find together. Let's pray, and then we have to go into Jonah, chapter 2.

Lord, I just want to thank you right now for our Students ministry and our Kids ministry. We just pray for families to value these environments. Lord, I thank you for the leaders, both the staff leaders and the lay leaders, who invest so much time and energy and prayer into creating these environments where the gospel can be accessible at a young age and to help, particularly, middle schoolers and high schoolers deal with all of the difficulties of life and all of the confusing times.

Right now, middle schoolers and high schoolers are confused about identity, meaning, and purpose, and I pray that Two Cities Church would always be a place where they can learn your Word and be sent out on mission. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.

All right, guys. Has your life ever hit rock bottom? Have you ever hit rock bottom? Don't raise your hand. I don't know if you've ever experienced this. One person told me recently... I asked, "How did you become a Christian?" He said, "I had to experience my own little version of hell on earth." Have you ever royally messed up? Have you ever gotten caught and were like, "Oh no! What does this mean for my future?"

It's interesting. People can hit rock bottom a lot of different ways. You can hit rock bottom when you are in college and it has been the desire of your life to go into medicine and you can't pass organic chemistry. I know it sounds silly to us, but for somebody who wanted to be a doctor their whole life... When you hit rock bottom, one

of the questions you ask is, "What now?" And you ask this too: "What's wrong with me, and how long have I been wrong?"

You can hit rock bottom in a relationship in your 20s when you're like, "He's the one. She's the one. We're going to get married. We're going to have a house. I'm going to have his last name. We're going to have kids." And all of a sudden, he's not that into you anymore and breaks the relationship off, and everything you thought about the future of your life isn't happening.

It can happen when you walk into your boss' office, and you're like, "All right. Money. Promotion," and you walk out with no job. That happens to people. It can happen when you get the wrong type of cancer. No cancer is good, but then there's the wrong type of cancer, and there's the wrong stage of the wrong type of cancer. You're like, "I don't know that I'm ready to say goodbye to everybody I love."

Whenever you hit rock bottom, you will ask yourself an enormous amount of questions, as well as you will meet your real self. But I'll tell you this. People hit rock bottom sometimes because of an economic downturn. It's like, "I didn't see it coming. My whole industry is gone." It happens.

The hardest type of hitting rock bottom is when you hit rock bottom and you know it's your fault, when you hit rock bottom and you're like, "It could have been otherwise, but it was my sinful, foolish decisions." Well, if you'll turn to Jonah 1:17, Jonah hits rock bottom, and I mean *rock bottom*. From the language of his prayer, he may as well, we think, be basically at the bottom of the ocean.

Here's Jonah 1 and 2 in a sentence: *Jonah runs from God until he hits rock bottom, and then he looks up*. Now, here's the good news: you don't have to run from God and hit rock bottom and *then* look up. You don't have to wait until you hit rock bottom to look up. You can look up right now. But here's what I know about you and me. A lot of times, we don't look up until we've actually hit rock bottom.

If you weren't here last week, the story starts out where God comes to Jonah and says, "I want you to go to Nineveh." Instead, he goes to Not Nineveh. He goes to Tarshish instead. Nineveh was only 500 miles away to the east. Tarshish was 2,500 miles away to the west. Sometimes it's simpler and shorter to just obey God. Not easier, but simpler and shorter.

He runs from God, and there's a storm, and all of these other things. Here's the big idea: *you can run from God, but you can't outrun God*. God is going to pursue you not to *pay* you back but to *bring* you back, not to ruin your life but to restore you. So, what I want

us to do today with our time together is I want us to look at the story of Jonah, because like I told you, we are Jonah. This is our story.

If you are a Christian, I want to say to you what Charles Spurgeon, the famous prince of preachers, said. He said it is impossible for saints to sin successfully. The Lord will not let his true saints sin successfully. If you really are a Christian, and you're living in sin, it won't be long until you are a miserable Christian. With that said, we have to talk about two things today. We have to talk about the fish, and we have to talk about what Jonah did *in* the fish.

## 01 JONAH & THE FISH

Let's first talk about the fish. Everybody is talking about the fish. Everybody is interested in the fish. The fish only shows up in three verses, just so you know: in verse 17 (the end of chapter 1), in verse 1 of chapter 2, and in verse 10 of chapter 2. So, there are three mentions of the fish.

Here's a way to think about it. Chapter 2 is framed by the fish. Twice it's mentioned that Jonah is in the belly of the whale. So, we're going to look at what we know about the fish. There's a lot we don't know, but let's look at what we know. Turn with me to verse 17, and let's see from these verses, the only three verses in the book that talk about the fish, what we can know about the fish.

Here it is. **"And the LORD appointed a great fish..."** So, what do we know? The fish was really big. Everything in the book of Jonah is big. **"...to swallow up Jonah."** So, we know the fish swallowed Jonah. Okay. **"And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."** So, we know where he was *in* the fish (that's actually strangely mentioned twice), and we know he was there for three days and three nights. So, we know where he was and how long he was there.

Chapter 2, verse 1: **"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish..."** So, we know the one thing Jonah did when he got in the belly of the fish was he prayed. Finally. Look at verse 10. **"And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."**

Can't you see the modern man and modern woman going, "This is exactly why I don't believe the Bible. This is ridiculous!" Well, think about this. I don't have time to get into all of the arguments for how this could happen. It's a miracle. That's why we call it a *miracle*. We don't call it *Monday*. This is special.

Think about this for a second. If we're made in the image of God, and God is way above us, and we figured out a way to create a submarine that could hold many people under water for 100 days, don't we believe that the one who made us, the one whose image we're made in, could figure out a way to keep Jonah for three days?

The point is not so much the fish but what happens in the fish, but I want to talk to you about a couple of things we know about the fish, because I think it's really important. The first thing, just to get context... We always think we know these stories in the Bible, and then we read them a little bit more carefully, and we're like, "Okay. I didn't know that."

Here's the first thing maybe you didn't know but we find out in this story: the fish didn't swallow Jonah right away. It has been said God is never late but rarely early. What happens is... Let me pick up the story. Jonah gets thrown off the ship, and the storm ceases, but... And you'll see this. Read it with your Community Group. In Jonah, chapter 2, Jonah talks about drowning, almost drowning, almost going down to sheol. He actually uses images of being covered in weeds like graveclothes.

So, here's what we know. Jonah gets thrown off the ship. My guess is he knew how to swim, so he probably tried to tread water. Do you know how long the average human can tread water for? Two to three hours before you're just exhausted and give up. Do you know how long you can hold your breath for? Usually, depending on health, for about one to two minutes you can hold your breath under water.

So, Jonah treads water for a couple of hours. Why does God wait? We'll try to talk about that a little bit. He gets down, and then the fish swallows him. Here's the other thing we know about the fish. If you look at chapter 1, verse 17... I want you to see this arise right out of the text. God is responsible for the fish.

It says, in verse 17, God appointed a fish to swallow him, and then in chapter 2, verse 10, it says the Lord spoke to the fish. He didn't even speak to Jonah. He spoke to the fish, and the fish vomited him out. I've told you this before, but everything in creation does exactly what God says except us.

Then there are a lot of, what we would call, *gospel parallels* or *gospel pictures*, foreshadowings, of what is to come in the person and work of Christ in the book of Jonah. For example, the fish (and I can prove this to you) is both a picture of God's judgment and God's salvation. How do we know that?

Well, in the Old Testament, the word *swallow* always has negative connotations referring to judgment. You'll hear stories in the Bible where the ground opened up and swallowed them. So, it's the language of judgment, but also (you'll see this by the end of Jonah's

prayer), Jonah basically goes, "The Lord used this fish to deliver me." So, it's both God's discipline and his deliverance, both his judgment and his salvation.

That may not make sense to us until we think about the major central event in the Bible and in all of human history, the cross of Jesus Christ. And what happened at the cross of Jesus Christ? Judgment and salvation, mysteriously enough. At that one event is judgment and salvation. God judges Jesus in our place for our sins and, through that event, brings salvation to every sinner who would ever repent and believe.

Then we have to look at another gospel parallel with this story. How is Jonah saved? Jonah is saved by being inside something. He had to get out of the water and get inside the fish to be saved. The favorite phrase in the New Testament by the apostle Paul is to say, "In Christ." For us to be saved, we have to be united to Christ by faith, and somehow, in the mind and heart of God (I don't fully understand it), that puts us in Christ to where we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

I want you to see something. Go back to verse 17. It says, "**And the LORD appointed a great fish...**" We don't know if it was a whale. It probably was. "**...to swallow up Jonah.**" There's judgment. "**And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**"

Two other observations. First, Jonah is surprised (and we should be too, but we know this story) by how God saves him. God tends to save his people in surprising ways that we would never see. We read the story of Jonah and are like, "All right. Don't worry, Jonah. You're going to get swallowed and spit up, and it'll be okay."

Could you imagine you're drowning, you're on your last breath, and a massive sea creature comes to eat you? You'd be like, "Well, maybe this is better than drowning. I'm not sure." In the New Testament, does not God save his people in the most surprising way by sending his Son to live a sinless life, to be our substitute, to pay the penalty of our sin on the cross, and to rise from the dead?

Here's another interesting thing. It says he's in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, which tells me another thing about God. God is not necessarily concerned with speed when he's working with us. If God's main agenda was "We've got to get him to Nineveh..." He's God. Right? He can do anything.

"We could teleport him. We could do the Elijah thing of the Old Testament and get the chariot. We could bring a big bird. He could just quickly be in the fish and the fish spit him out and he's on dry land." Why three days? I've told you this before, but I want you to see it in the text. God is often more concerned about what he's doing *in* us than what he's doing *through* us.

Or as a mentor of mine told me in college... I've never forgotten it. I was a freshman in college, and he said, "Kyle, God is more concerned with you relationally than 'destinationally.'" When we think about our lives and our relationship with the Lord... "Lord, where are you leading? What's the will of God? Who am I going to marry? What's my job? How many kids should I have? Where should we live?"

We're concerned destinationally. We have it all backward. God is concerned relationally. If you focus on it relationally, you'll get there destinationally. This is why Moses spends 40 years as a shepherd in the wilderness before he gets to talk to Pharaoh. This is why, before Jesus Christ enters full-time ministry, he spends 40 days fasting and praying in the desert.

This is why, in an obscure passage in the New Testament, Paul says, "When I became a Christian, I didn't go first to teach and preach, but I went away to Arabia for three years." When I first read that, I was like, "How many churches could you have planted in those three years? How many people could you have led to Christ? How many people could you have pastored? How much Bible could you have taught?" Well, obviously, God wanted to do something *in* Paul before he did something *through* Paul.

Before we move on from the fish, one other thought. I don't know if you've ever had this thought, but let's have this thought together. What's it like to be inside a fish? Full disclosure. I've never been in a fish. I don't plan on being in a fish. I don't think *you've* been in a fish.

The Bible tells us real stories. This really happened, but I always say, "The Bible isn't what happened; it's what happens." So, I think, if I describe what it's like to be in the fish, some of you are going to go, "Yeah, I think I've been there, metaphorically, proverbially, spiritually." Or some of you will think, "That's exactly where my daughter is right now."

There are three things about a fish. First, it's dark. You can't see anything. That is certainly when you know you're in the belly of the whale, when you're like, "I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go." We're all... Maybe, as we get older as adults, we're a little bit less afraid, but as kids, everybody is afraid of the dark. Everybody goes through that stage. It's because you don't know what else is there. You don't know what's going to happen.

The first thing is darkness. The Bible says darkness can be, "I don't know where I'm going." Some of you might be there. Darkness can be, "There's something I don't understand." "The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light." Darkness can be living in secret sin. So, sometimes you're in the whale when there's darkness.

Secondly, you're in the whale when you're stuck. We all hope Jonah was not claustrophobic, because he wasn't going anywhere for three days. Some of you feel stuck in your job. When I say *stuck*, I mean, like, "I'm in the same place, and I am making no progress." Some of you feel stuck in your marriage. Some of you feel stuck with your kids. Like, "What do I do? Where do I go?"

You know you're in the whale when you feel darkness, when you feel stuck, or when you just feel alone. No one else can fit in that whale with him. In fact, that's one of the saddest things about this whole book. He's alone when he runs from God, he's alone on the ship, he's alone in the water, and now he's alone in the whale.

## 02 JONAH FINALLY PRAYS FOR FIRST TIME

Well, I want you to see, for the rest of our time... This is where we can really learn some lessons. What's interesting about Jonah is Jonah, chapter 1, is "Don't be like Jonah," but Jonah, chapter 2, is "Be like Jonah," because God is going to do something. God brings pain into Jonah's life for a purpose. This is a theological belief you have to have. This is an element of faith.

Jonah is like, "There's a purpose in this pain. There's a lesson in this loss." Turn to chapter 2, verse 1. I'll show you this. I'm going to show you what happens. In fact, what happens in chapter 2 is we move from the event to the interpretation of the event. This happens a lot of times in the Bible. We move from narrative to poetry, from a story to a prayer.

This happens, for example, in Exodus 14. When they go through the Red Sea, immediately afterward, Moses sings a song about it so we can understand it more. So, here is Jonah's prayer of what he's experiencing in the belly of the whale. Chapter 2, verse 1: ***"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish..."***

Here's what I want you to know: You can pray to God from anywhere. You can cry out to God from anywhere. He was in the belly, the deepest part of the fish, and he cried out to God. You can cry out to God right after you've done the worst thing you could ever think you could do. You can cry out to God right before you're about to do the worst thing you've ever thought you would do.

You can cry out to God in the hospital bed. You can cry out to God in your dorm room. You can cry out to God when you're at some party you shouldn't be at and when you're doing something on vacation you shouldn't be doing. You can cry out to God. God is always way more willing to listen than we are to pray.



Here's what's interesting in the story of Jonah. It takes us all the way to chapter 2 for Jonah to finally pray. Here's when Jonah *didn't* pray. Jonah didn't pray when God's word came to him. The way the Bible should work is God speaks to us through his Word, and then we speak to him through prayer. How many horrible things happened in our lives because we never prayed about something?

Jonah didn't pray when he got on the ship. Jonah didn't pray when there was a storm. From what we can tell, just from what we have in Jonah, chapter 1... Do you remember that scene last week? The captain comes to Jonah and says, "We're dying. The boat is sinking, and we're throwing cargo off. We prayed to all of our gods. Will you pray to *your* God?" From what we can tell, Jonah says, "No. Throw me over." It takes something horrible happening in Jonah's life for him to finally pray.

There are several lessons I want us to learn today, because I want us to be a church that prays. I want you to be a dad who prays and a mom who prays and a family that prays, and we want to do everything in an environment of prayer and worship. We get one of the best pictures in the Old Testament of what it looks like to pray, so I want to give you a couple of principles.

The first principle is prayer needs to be a priority in our lives. Prayer often will not be a priority in our lives until something painful happens to us. We want prayer to be our first response, but if we're honest, it's often our last resort. You get the diagnosis. Before you pray, you probably Google it. "How bad is this? Do I really need to pray about this?"

In fact, I've heard it said that the most subtle... Most of us, because we know it's the right answer, would probably say we're prideful, as Christians, but we don't really think we're very prideful. Well, listen to this. Prayerlessness is the most subtle form of pridefulness.

Jonah cries out to God for the first time. I want to encourage you. There's something you need to be praying about that you're not, and you need to start crying out about it. There is something you started to pray for, and you've stopped praying for it, and this story is an encouragement for you to turn back to God and pray about it.

So, the first thing is really simple. He prioritizes prayer. But this is really important. Secondly, he prays passionately. Look at verse 2. **"...saying, 'I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me...'"** He goes one step farther. **"...out of the belly of Sheol..."** That's the grave. That's how we know that he basically almost died. **"...I cried, and you heard my voice."**

When was the last time you prayed passionately about something? I mean, you prayed passionately to where your kids were like, "Dad, what was going on in your office?" You prayed so passionately about something that maybe you started getting angry. I don't

know. When was the last time you got emotional and cried and broke down over something you were praying about?

The great Charles Finney... He was this revivalist preacher and evangelist. He credited his entire ministry to his prayer warrior Father Nash. In fact, he said that when Father Nash died the power on his ministry left. He said, "Father Nash would pray for me until sweat covered his body and he fell asleep due to exhaustion."

Guys, some of us need to say, "God, I repent of my weak, inauthentic, going-through-the-motions prayers. I've been praying about the right things, but I've been praying about them all wrong." See, prayer tends to fall into two categories. I'm not as worried about this first category with us here, but I'll give it to you because it's the category I grew up in.

For some people, all they know how to do is say their prayers. Do you know what I'm talking about? "Say your prayers tonight before you go to bed." "Say your prayers" is the formal praying. If you are a former Roman Catholic like me, you know the... I mean, I can say the dinner prayer (it's a formal prayer you say as a Catholic over dinner) in 10 seconds. "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord, amen."

I don't know what it means still to this day. We were given the "Hail Mary." (Not the football game. This is a prayer.) We were given the "Our Father." We were given the Lord's Prayer. I remember... "Memorize your prayers and say them before you go to bed at night." Obviously, I'm not against some tools and resources and formal... I think it honors the Holy Spirit and honors church history to look over how other people prayed and learn from it, but you can't fall into formal praying only.

Some of you do it, and you don't even know you do it. Here's what you do. Here's how you'll know. You don't really know it until you're a parent. Then one night you ask Johnny to pray for dinner. You say, "Johnny, pray for dinner." Johnny prays an inauthentic, basic prayer, and then you realize, "That's the exact prayer I pray every night. I've been praying the same silly, inauthentic prayer, 'God, bless this food. Thanks for the family. Good night,' and now this is what I'm passing on to my kids."

The other extreme is the overly casual. "God is my Dad. I'm his son or daughter." I'm not against any of this, because when a person comes to Christ, especially if they come to Christ, like I did, out of Roman Catholicism and out of a lot of religiosity, they almost fall in love with the informal, casual nature of it. "You're telling me that whenever I want to, I can talk to God, just because he's my Dad and I'm his son? So, I just pour out my heart to him. I go on a prayer walk, and I just tell God what I'm feeling."

I think that's great, but if I can quote the late, great Tim Keller... Tim Keller said we need to have communion prayer and kingdom prayer. He said *communion prayer* is your walking shoes, and *kingdom prayer* is your working boots, and he said very few people know how to pray with their working boots on. I'll give you an old word we don't use very often anymore, but we should: *intercession*. To intercede on someone's behalf.

Do you remember when Jon Tyson was here a couple of months ago? Well, he was on tour, so he was traveling a lot, so when I picked him up at the airport, he had been up since 4:00 in the morning. He did a podcast, and he was going to preach that evening. He said, "Before I preach, I need to go back to the hotel. I need to nap."

He had about a two-hour window, so I said, "Great. I'll take you back to the hotel." So, I drop him off at the hotel. You know, I'm checking my watch. "Great. I'll be back in two hours." Two hours later, I come back to pick him up. I'm like, "Hey, man. Did you sleep well?" He goes, "Yeah." I go, "Did you get two hours in?" He goes, "No. I slept for an hour, and then I got up and interceded for my son for an hour."

I was like, "Who are you?" He was like, "Oh, yeah. My son is getting married. He's marrying this great Christian girl, and I'm just burdened. I'm burdened that they honor Christ in their marriage. I'm burdened that they don't start having bad habits early in marriage. I'm burdened that they merge their lives together. So I spent about an hour interceding for them." I thought, "Wow!"

I think you can grow in prayer through two main ways, through discipline or desperation. Discipline will only take you so far. You can do the "Hold me accountable to pray 30 minutes a day." You can tell your spouse, "Let's go on a prayer walk every night after dinner for 10 minutes." You can do the, "We're going to begin and end the day in prayer."

You can do the, "Hey, I'm going to commit to praying for 5 to 10 minutes after every one of the times I read the Bible just to respond to God." That'll take you somewhere, but the people I meet are desperate for God to move. We should all (we know this; it's the right answer) be way more desperate than we are.

So, Jonah prioritizes prayer. He prays passionately. There's a third thing. When Jonah prays, he gets a new perspective. That's what some of you need. You need a new perspective. You're like, "God, I need a new perspective on my marriage, please. I need a new perspective on my prodigal. I need a new perspective on my health. I need a new perspective on my finances."

Let me show you what happens here. This is really amazing. I want you to see this right out of the text. He's praying to God, and he says, "**For you cast me into the deep...**" It's

like, "Hold on. No, no, no. We read it in the last chapter. Jonah, you're wrong. It wasn't God; it was the sailors. Remember, Jonah? You asked them to throw you over, and then they threw you. That's what happened." Jonah goes, "Eh, there was somebody else behind it and under it all."

***"For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves..."*** "God, the wave that hit me in the face when I was in the water was *your wave.*" ***"...and your billows passed over me."*** Now, I don't know this for sure, but I don't think it's a big leap to say Jonah almost dying in the storm on the ship, and then being thrown overboard, and then being swallowed by a massive sea creature...

I think it's fair to say it's probably the worst thing that has ever happened in his whole life. I mean, you've had some bad days, but I don't know if you've had *that* day. Please hear this. This is a fairly deep idea from the Bible. Jonah is able to look at the worst event that has ever happened to him and say to God, "You are responsible for this." He's able to look at the worst event in his life and say, "God, you did this to me."

Now, let me be clear. I don't think it's our place to tell one another, "That's God's sovereignty in your life." It's never really helpful when somebody else points out, as a spectator, "Yeah, God did that to you." But I will tell you the most mature people I've met are people who can understand God's sovereignty even in the darkest parts of their life.

Here's a potential marriage hack. A marriage can change when you go, "God, maybe you designed the weaknesses of my spouse for some purpose in my life to make me a more godly and Christ-centered person." It's hard to look at the worst events in your life and say, even softly sometimes... We'll use language like, "God allowed." That's fine. "God permitted."

I want to show you an example of this. I don't know if you've ever heard of Jim Elliot. Jim Elliot was one of the most famous missionaries of the twentieth century. He and his good buddy Nate Saint... They were at Wheaton College. They had this passion for world missions, and they went to reach out to this unknown tribe, a dangerous tribe. They went to make contact with this unknown tribe, and when they did that, the men in this tribe speared them and killed them immediately.

Why am I telling you this story? Because when Nate Saint was killed, his son was a little boy. His son's name is Steve, and Steve is in his 50s now. I want to read you something Steve wrote. Only Steve can say this. No one can say this to Steve, but this is what Steve says.

"I have come to the conclusion that God did not look away." He's talking about his dad dying. "He did not simply allow this to happen. I think he planned it. Though this has not been an easy conclusion to come to, I believe it is the right one. I have personally paid a high price for what happened on Palm Beach. But I have also had a front-row seat as the rest of the story has been unfolding for half a century. I have seen firsthand that much good has come from it. I believe only God could have fashioned such an incredible story from such a tragic event."

All I'm asking you to do... It's going to take a while for us to get to the place where we can sometimes look at the worst events in our lives and say what he said, but with prayer you become God-aware. This is why if couples are fighting with one another... Watch this next time you're fighting with your spouse.

The last thing you would want to do is pray together. And not just because you're mad at each other but because you don't want to invite that perspective in right now. That's what prayer does. It makes you God-conscious. Some of us are not thinking about anything rightly because we're not inviting God in through prayer.

That leads to the fourth thing: pray passages of Scripture. Go with me to verse 4. ***"Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'"*** By the way, he's quoting Psalm 18 and Psalm 120. He's quoting Scripture in his prayer.

***"The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head..."*** That's how we think he was at the bottom of the ocean. ***"...at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..."*** "I thought I was going to die." ***"...yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple."***

What's amazing is Jonah knew Scripture, but now he *needed* Scripture. There are two stages of your life, "I know something" and "I need it." This is why nobody reads marriage books until they're getting married. This is why no one reads parenting books until they're parents. This is why nobody reads books about heaven until they're dying. We often have to have that "need to know, need to grow" moment.

I remember (this wasn't that long ago) there was a godly man in our church, and he was dying of cancer. He reached out to the elders and said, "Hey, James 5 says, 'Gather the elders, anoint them, and let's pray for the sick that they might be healed.'" We've done this a couple of times with people. It was really moving, but the most moving part was right before we prayed, this guy said to us, "I've known this verse since I was a young man, but I need this verse today."

Everything Jonah knew he's now going to need, so he's going to pray Scripture. This is, I think, the most practical thing I'm going to say today about prayer. I have found nothing more helpful, personally, in praying better, more effectively, deeper, longer, or whatever, than praying the Bible. Here's why. I think the number-one reason we don't pray when we otherwise should...

If we're Christians, if we love the Lord, we want to pray. Why don't we pray? We don't know what to say, and we don't know where to start, and if we're honest... Do you ever feel like this? "I'm tired of praying about the same things the same way with the same words." You're like, "How many times can I pray for Junior's salvation?"

"I know your grandma is in the hospital. How many times can I pray for her, and in how many different ways can I pray for her healing?" You can feel that sometimes. You may not articulate it that directly. But if you start to pray the Bible, the Bible gives you all of these languages and all of these words and all of these categories, and it lets God start and steer the conversation.

I just want to encourage you. This just hit me in my preparation this week. If you ever go out in the hallway and see how it says, "Open Bible, open life" out there, I want you to understand that is our discipleship strategy, and (I didn't realize it until today) that is our prayer strategy. What's prayer? I open my life to God, and I open my Bible. What's a great prayer life? An open heart and an open Bible.

You just read the Bible. "God, this is what it's saying to me. This is what I'm experiencing." You go to the Psalms. He has to go to the Psalms because the Psalms... It has been said the whole Bible speaks to us, but the Psalms speak *for* us. The Psalms have every experience, and every emotion imaginable in the human experience is encapsulated in the Psalms.

So, again, prayer is a priority. He prays passionately. He gets perspective. He prays passages of Scripture. Here's another one: he prays to process his pain. Let me show you this. He's lamenting. Verse 5: ***"The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me..."*** He basically goes on and on and on talking about this difficulty.

Here's the thing. Prayer is one of the places (hopefully also in Christian community) where you can process your pain. We live in a time right now where it's very acceptable and there are a lot of avenues to share good news. If you have good news, you can share good news with even shallow relationships. You can share good news on social media.

But where do we go to express our pain, to talk about our doubts, to open up about our struggles and our suffering? Obviously, there are not a lot of vehicles to do that.

I heard one person one time say that when you're really struggling with something, when you're really feeling something inside, you have three options. You can *suppress* it, and that's not good for you. You can *express* it to others, and that's not good for us. We can't handle it a lot of times. Or you can *confess* it to God, because God is like, "Thank you. I already knew that, but I'm glad we can talk about it now. Thank you for opening up about it."

So, what he does... Let me give you the word for it. It's what theologians call *lament*. Basically, this is a sad prayer. It's okay. We live in a time where we don't have any sad songs that we sing anymore. It's okay for Christians to be sad. A third of the Psalms are like *this* psalm. They're a lament. Guys, we have a book in the Old Testament called *Lamentations*. A *lament* is a prayer to God in pain.

There are always four elements to every lament. There's *turning*, *complaining*, *asking*, and *trusting*. The biggest moment for all of us is when we turn to God in our pain instead of food or ice cream or more Netflix or alcohol or an unhealthy relationship or, if you're a man, immersing yourself in work and hoping you forget about it.

We turn, we complain, we tell God what's really going on, we ask him to move, and we trust him, which leads to the final interesting thing Jonah does in prayer. I want you to see verse 4 and verse 7. **"Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'" Then look at verse 7. "When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple."**

Very interesting. Twice, at the end of his prayer, he mentions the temple. In other words, prayer gives you new priorities. It gives you a new perspective, but it gives you new priorities. Basically, the temple was the place where the presence of God dwelt. It was where the people of God gathered. It was where the Word of God was preached.

I mean, the closest thing we have (it's not the exact same) is the local church today. I love this. Jonah has messed up his life. He's in the belly of the fish. And what is he thinking about? He's thinking about the local church. Because here's what happens. Sometimes, when your whole life gets messed up, you realize, "I have been prioritizing the wrong things."

I mean, the number... And we're so gracious, and we love it, and we help people. The number of people who have come to our church and basically said, "We got goofy during COVID, and it was a mistake. Our daughter is not doing well, and our son plays way too many video games, and all of his friends are online. I'm sorry. We had our kids out of

church for two years. I have no idea what we were thinking." It's like, "Okay." This is what you do in prayer. You say, "I need a new north star."

### **03 NONE OF OUR PRAYERS ARE PERFECT**

So, he says, "I'm re-prioritizing my life around God's people and God's Word and God's plans." Which leads to the end of his prayer in verses 8 and 9. ***"Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love."*** Toward the end of his prayer, he gets a little angry. He starts talking about people who were worshiping false idols.

He goes, ***"But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!"*** Basically, at the end of his prayer (this is what commentators notice, and I think they're right), he gets a little self-focused. He gets a little self-righteous, which is a reminder that none of our prayers are going to be perfect.

He starts calling out idols, but guess what he never mentions: his own idols. "Jonah, really? You don't have any idols? How about fear of man? How about safety? How about security? How about personal autonomy? How about selfishness and life is all about you? How about comfort?" He's thinking about the idols of the Ninevites; he's not thinking about his own idols.

Here's a great principle for life: it's always easier to see idols in other people's lives, because they're usually not the idols you're worshiping, so you can see them for what they are. Jonah declares, "Guys, idols are vain." Why? Because they don't love you back. Your car doesn't love you back. Your lake house doesn't love you back. Your boat doesn't love you back. Your country club membership doesn't love you back. Your hobbies don't love you back.

There's another reason why. They can't save you. All of these idols promise... Money is the clearest one. "If you had enough of me, I promise I could save you from all of the things that are terrible and going to happen in your life." So, he ends with this declaration, "Salvation belongs to the Lord," yet he has no heart for mission. We'll see this more next week.

### **04 JONAH IS HUMBLLED IN HOW HE IS SENT!**

I want us to go to verse 10. Some commentators basically look at verse 10 and go, "The fish is getting nauseated by the end of Jonah's prayer, and he's about to throw him up."



It's like, "Jonah, you're making me sick to my stomach." Verse 10: ***"And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."***

Why end like this? I've told you before a good Bible reader should be a confused Bible reader. Why is Jonah thrown up? Why doesn't God just nicely get him out of the fish? Why isn't the word *cough* or *spit* used? Why is the word *vomit*, which is always negative in the Old Testament, used? Because what's going to happen...

Here's the image. Jonah is back on dry land right where he started at the beginning, and now (I know this is gross; forgive me) he's covered in massive fish vomit. Here's what that's going to do, and this is what we need to do if we're going to be reminded of being faithful Christians. Why did God do that? Because Jonah is not going to be able to bathe. Jonah is not going to be able to shower.

God wanted Jonah to be reminded of the stench of his own sin, and he wanted Jonah to be reminded of his own salvation. Tim Keller basically said, "Do you know why most ministry to poor people doesn't work? Because those who do it have a sense of superiority." "I'm here to help you. What do you need?" versus "Man, I am a sinner, and God saved me. I'm very aware that I didn't just need grace. I need grace today. Grace is not something in my past; grace is something in my present."

As I heard one guy say one time... What is evangelism? It's one beggar showing another beggar where he found food. So, guys, what we want to do today... We can't read this passage, / I can't read this passage, of Jonah crying out to God and go... We have to respond. We can't just do nothing. We have to be doers of the Word, not merely hearers of the Word.

So, in just a few minutes, I'm going to call you forward to pray if God has so put that on your heart. I want to seek God's face together. We're all in different places, but here's what we have in common that's different than Jonah. Jonah cried out to the Lord from the belly of the fish, but he had to do it all alone.

I'm going to invite you to come down in a minute or two, and I don't want you to come alone if you want to bring a friend. Or if you come alone, I want you to know we're going to have elders down here, and they're going to meet you, and they're going to pray for you. There are people all over the place.

Listen. Some of you came to church today, and as soon as I talked about hitting rock bottom, you went, "How did you know?" You're not even in the fish, unfortunately. You're drowning, dead at the bottom of the ocean. Christianity tells us our problem isn't that we're spiritually poor; it's that we're spiritually bankrupt. It's not that we're spiritually sick; it's that we're spiritually dead.

Some of you need to come forward today and give your life to Jesus Christ. You need to say, "I'm crying out to the Lord. In fact, I've never really prayed in my life." It's interesting. When a baby is born, what's the first thing it does? It cries. When someone is born again, what's the first sign? What's the first thing they do? They cry out to the Lord for the first time. It's the sign that they've been born again and reborn.

For others of you, maybe you're in the belly of the whale, maybe you're not, but you have to apply the same lessons that Jonah did. I want to invite you up. I want you to come up and say, "I'm sorry. There's something I stopped praying for, and I'm committing today to start praying for it again."

Some of you need to come up here, and you've been praying for something, but you've not been praying passionately. You need to come down and ask God to break your heart again for your one or for your prodigal or for the condition of your marriage. Some of you need to just come forward and lament. We did this last service, and we prayed a lot of sad prayers together and trusted God in the midst of it. We turned to God and not to other things.

Some of you need to do what Jonah was unwilling to do. You need to come forward and confess and forsake your own idols. A lot of us, I bet, need to come forward for somebody else. There's somebody else who's not here. They're not going to be here right now. They should be here, but they're somewhere else, and you know, "They're in the belly of the whale, and I want to come forward for them."

So, if you'll stand, and if the elders will come forward, I want you guys to come. We're going to sing a couple of songs to create space. We're going to make time for it. We want you to hear you are not alone. We are going to seek God, and we're praying no small prayers down here, but only massive prayers.

I had a guy last service. He came to me and said, "Pray for me, because I've got to be on this pill the rest of my life." I said, "I'm not praying for you to be on the pill the rest of your life. We're praying for healing here." We're going to pray some big prayers. Let's pray together.

Lord, I pray that people would come, no matter their circumstances, no matter how big or small. Some of them feel in the dark, Lord, and they just need to come into the light. Some people here have not been prioritizing Christ, the church, and the Word of God, and they need to walk forward as the sign over their life that they're going to have some new priorities.

There are some people who need to just grab each other's hands or shoulder tap and say, "I'll go down with you." People don't need to come down alone. We need to come down,

Lord. We ask for big things. We ask that you, for your glory and for our good, would do mighty things in, through, and beyond us. In Jesus' name, amen.