

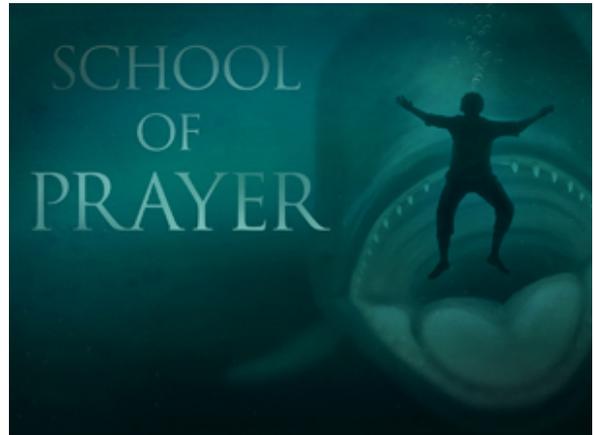
THE SCHOOL OF PRAYER

3rd January 2021

Reading: Jonah 2:1-10

I'm going to read a passage and I want you to guess what part of the Bible it comes from.

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.



Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple’.

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 forever; 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.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

Where do you think these verses came from? They sound like they come from Psalms don't they. Now, if I read the verse before the passage it will be clear.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish. Jonah 2:1

So, the passage is actually from the book of Jonah. Phrases like “cast me into the seas”, “the waters closed over me” and “weeds were wrapped about my head” might have given you a clue, as might the sermon graphic! However, if you heard the passage alone, with no clues, most Christians would guess the Psalms. Why? Indeed, Jonah had gone to the school of prayer and that school was the Psalms. So, when finding himself in a desperate plight a Psalm-like prayer was his natural response. And it can be ours too if we also enroll in the same school. So, this morning we're going to briefly recap Jonah's story, then we'll look at Jonah's schooling and then the prayer itself, Jonah's prayer in the belly of a large fish.

I. Jonah's Story

Now many of us here know the story of Jonah. If we've grown up in church, we may remember the story of Jonah being told by a flannel graph when we were very small. This was like Eugene Peterson, known for his Bible translation *The Message*, first memory of Jonah. Later at Bible College Jonah was the first book Peterson translated from the Hebrew into English and he makes the comment Jonah just as much fun in the Hebrew as it was as a flannel graph in Sunday School.

So, who is Jonah? Jonah was a prophet whom God told to preach to the Ninevites, the most hated enemies of Israel. For this reason, Jonah will not go but instead boards a boat heading in the opposite direction. However, God sends a ferocious storm. And to save the sailors Jonah asks to be thrown overboard. God sends a large fish who not only swallows him but after three days spits Jonah out onto the shore near Ninevah. Having learned his lesson Jonah preaches to the Ninevites who surprisingly listen and repent. And because they do God in his mercy holds off judgment, much to Jonah's disgust.

In fact, as you read the Jonah story the only thing he gets right is his prayer in the belly of a fish.

II. Jonah's Schooling

So, then brings us to his prayer that very much sounds like a Psalm. And why so? Well, Jonah had been so well schooled the marks of his learning are all over his prayer. It's a school we can enroll in and like all good schools has a curriculum.

a. Curriculum

Well, the core curriculum is – no surprise - the Psalms. All 150 of them. This is why Jonah's prayer has the feel of a Psalm and in particular a Psalm of lament. Now a lament has a different purpose and feel from the Psalms of worship, thanksgiving or royalty. However, Laments are the most common form. Why? Probably because it's the most common condition of life. We're in trouble a lot, so we pray lots of laments. The human condition is thoroughly mixed up, so no wonder laments are the stock prayer of the Psalms. Statistically they're the most common. Now a lament has a predictable opening, middle and end. There's a rhythm and phrasing that's recognizable by those so schooled.

So, if we want to pray our true condition, be authentic in prayer, if we want to grow in prayer, if we want our prayers to be authentic, we need to enroll in the same school as Jonah.

Now, before we get into the detail of Joanh's prayer let me explain one of the big advantages of using the Psalms to guide our praying. You see, although Jonah's prayer was kicked off by his plight, by his need, he quickly drew upon the Psalms to guide his prayer. And because he did, he didn't get stuck in his need. His prayer was not reduced to a sole focus on his plight but became much bigger and embracing. A prayer that went beyond "I'm in trouble Lord, please help". His prayer reflected the largeness and wonder of the God to whom he was praying too, and not confined his immediate pain or need.

Now this is such a contrast to many of our prayers. Our prayers, like Jonah, are often kicked off by experience, but stay mired in our pain or need. And though this is a good starting place our prayers often stop here and remain self-centered and Oh so small.

But real prayer - Biblical prayer, Psalm prayer, rich prayer, deep prayer - is dominated by a sense of God, a sense of awe, of wonder, of a bigger picture, of being caught up in the grand story of redemption - God's saving work among us. Prayer, God pleasing prayer, is a way of moving from a preoccupation with ourselves and being caught up in adoration of our Heavenly Father and finding rest in his great love.

Let me give you an example to help show what I mean. A lecturer was teaching a creative writing course at University. Students typically enroll in such classes because they want to write poems or stories. However, most of the time their writing reeks of self-absorption. Everything they composed was reduced and recast in terms of "me and my experiences".

However real writers know this is not how it works. While personal experience often provides a starting point the act of writing is primarily an exploration of a larger world beyond the author's experience. A move from exploring self to creatively exploring the other. So, the lecturer became increasingly board and frustrated.

One day, in a moment of desperation, he took his students across the road to a cemetery. There they spent time walking among the graves, reading the tombstones and taking notes on what they observed, how they felt and what they imagined. They were then asked to write creatively from what they'd experienced. And it worked. The young writers were able to start getting past their experiences into bigger worlds that they'd not explored before.

In many respects the Psalms are our cemetery by which the Holy Spirit leads and guides us in prayer to think, imagine and pray into a bigger world and get past our self-absorption.

Now this praying the Psalms has been the way of the church for some eighteen hundred years. It's only in the last couple of hundred years that the Psalms have been discarded and replaced by trendy devotional aids, psychological mood changers and walks on a moonlit beach. Now devotional aids and spiritual disciplines have their place but not at the expense of the Psalms. In the School of Prayer, the Psalms are our core curriculum while devotional aids and spiritual disciplines are more elective subjects¹.

b. Classroom

Now, if the Psalms are the curriculum where's the classroom. Well, for Jonah it was most unusual. It was in the belly of a big fish. Now, Jonah will have learned the Psalms in other situations but let's consider his current dilemma - confined in the belly of a very large fish. And it's here that Jonah drew upon the Psalms, praying earnestly, intensely and from the heart. In fact, one might argue that Jonah's best prayer - ever - came from within the belly of this fish.

And it's similar for us. When we're in the belly of a fish we also have the opportunity to pray our most earnest, intense and heartfelt prayers. Whether it be in the midst of financial hardship, relationship collapse, career reversal or family difficulty - whatever our hard place - this is the classroom where we hone our prayer life and lean into the Psalms. The Psalms will be a wonderful resource for you in your confined and restricted place.

III. Jonah's Prayer

Now let's see how Jonah's prayer follows the pattern of the Psalms. Firstly with words and phrases.

a. Words

Well, he certainly uses the language of the Psalms. See the many expressions Jonah takes directly from the Psalms

"my distress"	from Ps 18:6
"Sheol" (the Hebrew word for grave)	from Ps 18:4-5
"all your waves and your billows passed over me"	from Ps 42:7
"from your presence"	from Ps 139:7
"upon your holy temple"	from Ps 5:7
"the waters closed in over me"	from Ps 69:2
"my life from the pit"	from Ps 30:3
"my life was fainting away"	from Ps 142:3
"into your holy temple"	from Ps 18:6
"Salvation belongs to the Lord"	from Ps 3:8

¹ With the exception of fasting.

Jonah was so well schooled, so familiar and had prayed the Psalms so often, that when praying in the belly of a large fish he was able to draw upon the full resources of God's Word.

b. Emotion

However, prayer is not just a matter of vocabulary - of having the right words - it's the heart behind the words that's also vital. Now, every human emotion is found within God's Word and in particular the Psalms. And these phrases and expressions are a treasure chest of priceless gems when it comes to putting our own feelings into words before the Living God.

Wonder: For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:13–14

Repentance: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. Psalm 51:10–12

Worship: Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing. Psalm 100:1–2

Confidence in God: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4

The Psalms help us to put into words the expression of our hearts – our emotions - which are just as important as the expression of our thoughts. You see the Psalms give us permission to bring our feelings to God - of our anger toward him or frustration at his slowness to act, or betrayal by a friend, or deep remorse for our failings.

c. Form (or pattern)

Now, the Psalms also help give form to our thoughts and feelings. Let's take the lament, the style that Jonah prayed within the fish. A lament moves from an honest and real cry of our heart to expressing confidence in and praise to God. Psalm 13 is a great example, starting with...

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? Psalm 13:1–2

And finishes with

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me. Psalm 13:5–6

The power of a lament is giving voice - putting into words - our troubles, and then nudging us to a confidence in our Heavenly Father. Knowing that God is both merciful in kind, a lament gives us freedom to be honest with how we feel, knowing he won't come down on us like a ton of bricks, but also making sure we do not wallow in our troubles.

So, before I finish with some take homes – a brief summary. Jonah was enrolled in the School of Prayer with the Psalms as its curriculum. Now the classroom is anything from where we have your devotional times to well... the belly of a fish. The Psalms teach us, guide us, show us how to bring our thoughts and feelings to God openly and honestly. Psalms also help provide a rhythm and structure to our prayers.

IV Application

And this brings us to our take home for today. Here we are on the first Sunday of the New Year. 2021 stretches out before us and alongside the uncertainty of covid 19 and other unknowns we have opportunities and new beginnings to consider. So, when it comes to our faith here's my challenge for you in 2021:

- a. Read a Psalm a day
- b. Pray a Psalm a day

Now there are 150 Psalms and so you'll have a chance to read and pray each Psalm two to three times. Many are short and some not so. Anyway, after reading a Psalm pause and consider. Read it again - out loud and then ask God "how can I pray this prayer". Sometimes this will be obvious - one Psalm helps us worship, another to give thanks, another to repent. A number will be directed to the king of Israel or to be sung by king - these are pointing to Jesus the true and better king. Others frankly will be a puzzle. And for these - again ask God how you can pray and move to the next one. There'll be times when the Psalm just hits the spot and at other times, you'll - well you'll be bored. However, remember these are the same Psalms that Jesus sang, that Jesus prayed and meant so much to him. And so, when we enroll in the school of prayer, we are very much following in the footsteps of Jesus our dear Lord and Saviour. Who is where? I mean where is Jesus now? At the right hand of the Father interceding in prayer for us. Let's join him. *Let's pray.*