

A Sinner's Prayer?

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, a couple of years ago, a friend of mine was driving back home to Scotland from England on the motorway in his tin can of a car.

He drove a Peugeot 106, and the car was ancient and tiny, and it shook violently when it got over 60 miles an hour.

And halfway home, he and his tiny car was overtaking a lorry when the lorry began to signal and began to pull out into the road in front of him.

Unbelievably, he escaped with only a dent and a big scrape in his passenger side door. Thankfully, no one was harmed. But I wonder if we had planted a microphone on his dashboard.

I wonder what kind of prayer would he have prayed as this lorry started to turn into the side of his car? I don't know what he prayed or if he prayed, but I reckon a prayer prayed within a few seconds of death or imminent disaster would be short and sharp and perhaps not so sweet.

[1 : 15] I imagine it would have been a simple prayer for God, please, to protect his life. I don't imagine that that prayer would have been anything to write down when he got home.

So beautiful and brilliantly worded that he'd never want to forget the words that he prayed. But now imagine that my friend had stolen the car that he was driving.

If you'd seen the car he was driving, you would know he hadn't stolen it. But imagine he had stolen the car. Would his prayer have been any different?

I would think his prayer would have been quite different. An urgent prayer, not only for God to protect his life, but an urgent prayer that God would please forgive him his sin.

And if God should graciously spare his life, that he would help him to live a different life from then on. In short, my point is, in a crisis, the prayer of an innocent sufferer is different from the prayer of a guilty sufferer.

[2 : 22] And I want us to start there this evening because we are looking at a prayer that Jonah, a man in the Bible, prayed in a crisis. And the question is, is Jonah an innocent or a guilty sufferer?

Last week in chapter 1, we saw that Jonah the prophet has tried to run from God because he hated God's plan. God, being gracious and slow to anger and full of love, planned to save an evil city by sending Jonah to them with a message.

But Jonah refused to go, not as we saw to save his own skin, but even worse, because he would rather have died than see God rescue an evil city.

And so when Jonah splashes into the dark, chaotic sea and is swallowed by a sea monster, what kind of sufferer is he? Well, he is surely a guilty sufferer.

But what kind of prayer does Jonah pray? Look with me again at the beginning of his prayer. In my distress, I call to the Lord, he said, and he answered me from deep in the realm of the dead.

[3 : 42] I called for help, and you listened to my cry. This is the prayer of an innocent sufferer. To put it a different way, how often in this prayer does Jonah own up to his sin and ask God to forgive him?

Zero times. Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 is what's called in the commentaries a psalm of thanksgiving. In short, he was in trouble, but the Lord rescued him, and now he's very thankful. But we know that's not the whole story, is it? Because the trouble that Jonah is in is a direct result of his sin. And stranger still, the whole prayer has a formality to it that you would not expect in a crisis. It's as if Jonah's going down the throat of this fish and trying desperately to remember the collect from the fifth Sunday after Advent in the Book of Common Prayer. In short, there's just something about this prayer that doesn't add up.

So there are basically two ways to read Jonah's prayer in chapter 2. One way is to take it at face value and say, Jonah is repenting. The problem with that, though, is that if this, at this point in the

book, is Jonah's big change of heart, then why, when he prays again, after God has rescued the evil city, is he still so angry with God he could die?

[5 : 12] The other way to read this prayer, which I find more convincing, is to read this prayer as the prayer of a man who thinks now God has rescued his life, everything is okay now, but who has still not properly come to terms with the depths of his need or of God's grace for him or for a lost world.

In short, I am convinced that this prayer is not here to teach us how to repent, but to warn us how easy it is to pretend we don't need to, how easy it is for us to slip into thinking that we are somehow worthy of God's grace or at least more deserving of God's grace than other people, but disguise that pride behind the right words.

Or to put it differently, how easy it is for us to pray the proud prayer of the Pharisee rather than the sorry prayer of the tax collector. It should be impossible, but in truth, spiritual pride and presumption are very possible, and sometimes very real in our lives, even as undeserving rebels who God has saved in his undeserved grace.

But before we get really into this prayer, the other question, what about the fish? The fish is the obvious question in this chapter, isn't it?

How could a fish swallow a person and that person survive in a fish for three days and three nights? I'm not a fish expert. I'm told that there are some species of fish that could swallow a person, but if anything, the fish is a red herring.

[7 : 00] Forgive me. We are told nothing about this fish other than that the Lord sent it and the fish did what God wanted it to do.

Which tells us that what's important about the fish isn't what kind of fish it is, but that the fish belongs to the Lord and that the Lord is king over it. And so if we struggle with how a fish could swallow a person and how that person could survive in a fish for three days and three nights, well, let me suggest that the real question is whether the God that we believe in is big enough to make that happen.

The God that we find in the Bible isn't limited by natural rules. He wrote the rule book. He created everything. He upholds everything in existence. There's not an atom in the farthest corner of the universe that moves without his direct say-so.

Normally God keeps things going in a predictable way, but if God wasn't free to do things differently, well, then he wouldn't be God.

And so sometimes God does do something unpredictable or we might say unnatural to fulfill his plan and his purpose, what we call a miracle.

[8 : 23] And so the question of this fish is really a question of whether we get how big God is and how free he is to rule our world in line with his desires and his plans.

But as I say, the biggest question in this chapter isn't the strange fish. It's the strange prayer that Jonah prays from inside of the fish. And so turning to this prayer, the first question that it prompts us to ask is, are we presuming on God's grace?

Are we presuming on God's grace? Listen again to the way Jonah's prayer begins, verse two. In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the sea and the current swirled about me.

All your waves and breakers swept over me. Now, it's often pointed out that in Jonah's prayer for help, verse three there is very nearly word for word, a quotation from Psalm 42 and verse seven, which tells us Jonah clearly knew the Psalms by heart in a crisis.

[9 : 43] He could draw on that knowledge of God's word and speak God's words back to him. And if you were to read Psalm 42 later, you would find it is a wonderful Psalm for praying in distress.

It's the Psalm with the refrain, why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me? But there's no sign in that Psalm that the suffering is brought about by the Psalmist's sin. He's an innocent sufferer. Why is he suffering? Well, we don't know. He doesn't know. We only know that he is. Suffering without knowing why is really like being crashed down on by waves and being churned about in currents.

We feel helpless and passive and thrown about by things that come our way from we don't know where. In those times, it is a wonderful thought that the crashing waves and churning currents of our lives ultimately belong to God.

They are, as he prays, your breakers and your waves. You can take heart in the truth that when we suffer and we don't know why, God is still in control and our lives are still held in his loving hands. [11:07] And so when Jonah quotes those words in verse three of his prayer, it's natural for us to think he's praying rightly. He's crying out for help from God, tick.

He's recognizing God's sovereignty, tick. He's praying a psalm, big tick. For free church orthodoxy, this prayer gets a gold star, doesn't it?

But is this really the right prayer for Jonah to be praying at this point in his life? It's lovely for him to take comfort in God's being in control over his suffering, but that's not the whole story.

Because he is not the passive recipient of his suffering. He has walked straight into it. Why is Jonah in the sea at all?

Because he ran from God and went straight to the sea. And remember what Jonah requested in verse 13 of chapter one. Pick me up, he said, and throw me into the sea and it will become calm.

[12:19] So it's only half true, isn't it, for Jonah to say to God, chapter two, verse three, you hurled me into the depths. God is in control, but does Jonah not bear a good deal of responsibility for the trouble that he is in?

You get the sense in this prayer that Jonah feels very safe in the sea. But if God is indeed king, and these are indeed his waves, well, shouldn't Jonah feel at least a bit sheepish, if not outright terrified, given the way he has treated God?

Doesn't he come across as someone who feels a bit too safe and secure for someone who knows that God is the king of heaven and earth and yet has screamed no in his face?

It sounds totally irrational, but friends, do we never find ourselves doing that? It is a scarily common way for us to respond to God.

I've sat with guys who've done things they knew were terrible ideas and offensive to God, and when it's all gone wrong, the question they have asked is not, why did I ever do that terrible thing, but rather, why is God doing this to me?

[13:48] I've prayed with people who have chosen sin and found themselves in trouble, who have then come and asked for prayer for God to get them out of the trouble they're in, but not to deal with the sin that got them there.

I have had enough conversations like that to know that this false sense of security is never far enough away from my heart, away from your hearts.

I have sinned, life has gone wrong, now I need life to go right again, while the sin stays buried out of sight. Brothers and sisters, we cannot deceive God, and so let's not deceive ourselves.

We must watch our hearts for those sinful thoughts and desires and feelings that we would selectively delete from our memory. We must watch our prayers for those times where we raise our needs before God with one hand and with the other hand sweep our sins under the carpet.

We must watch our tongues for those times where we say so readily and pray the right things in public and tick the right boxes, but inwardly and privately rebel against the God who we say we love.

[15:18] Perhaps this evening you know the danger of a divided heart and you are on guard against those seeds of pride. Perhaps you struggle regularly to be honest with God without keeping the ugly stuff hidden, the sins in the shadows.

perhaps this is the first time that you are wondering whether your private inner life lives up to the words that you speak.

But whoever we are, whatever position we are in, God instructs us to guard our hearts with all vigilance. For from our hearts flow the streams of life, Proverbs 4.23.

This is why our honest prayers must include confession and repentance as well as requests for our very real needs. It's so important to say, of course, not all suffering is a result of our sin.

Perhaps you're going through something right now and you cannot explain why. In those times we can throw ourselves freely and fearlessly on God for his help and he will give it.

[16:34] But when we know, when we know that our sin does have something to do with it, even if life has not gone wrong yet, well, let's not pretend otherwise.

Because over time we can train our hearts to habitually presume on God's grace rather than to live by his grace. Look how bold Jonah is in praying, verse 4.

I said I've been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple. For someone who is in the sea, inside a sea monster, deep in the realm of the dead, he says, he seems

ridiculously confident of the outcome, doesn't he?

Yes, I'm far away from you now, Lord, but don't worry. I'll be back in your presence soon. I'll come back. It's as if he set out in sin expecting to be rescued.

The big question is how does he know he has been rescued? He's inside a fish. Jonah is presuming greatly on God's kindness. Let's put it in simple terms, he's taking God's grace for granted.

[17 : 48] He is like a friend who has disappeared for years out of your life, who then you get a call from them one day and he tells you he's coming to stay at your house next week. Paul warns us against that mindset towards God in Romans chapter 6.

Paul in chapter 5 has just finished writing about God's super abundant kindness to us who don't in any way deserve it. He writes where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

There's grace enough to cover every sin. Then, chapter 6 verse 1, what shall we say? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may abound? In short, if we know God's grace is enough for all our sins, shall we just carry on sinning and think no more of it?

Or, as a student once told me when I tried to question his chosen lifestyle, because God forgives me, I can sin boldly. By no means, says Paul, not a chance.

God's grace gives us immense security before God, knowing that Christ has taken the punishment for all of our sin. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, there is no sin so great that it can bring condemnation upon those who truly repent.

[19 : 16] But receiving God's grace rightly also confronts us with the truth that there is no sin so small, but it deserves condemnation.

Grace teaches us the seriousness of our sin before it frees us from our sin, or as John Wesley memorably put it, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved."

Presuming on God's grace is taking seriously the relief but not the fear.

Trusting that because of Christ your sin cannot condemn you, but forgetting that even the smallest of your sins deserves his condemnation. And the danger perhaps especially for those of us who have been Christians a long time or for some years or for those of us who have been coming to church for a long time is that that subtle pride is easy to cover up.

We know the right words to say, the right prayers to pray, the right books to read, the right verses to quote. And that's not a bad thing in itself.

We should have scripture in our bloodstream. We can pray with the forgiveness of our sins. But the better we are at talking the talk, the easier it is for us, like Jonah, to pray a perfectly orthodox, wordy, biblical prayer, and yet not scratch the surface of our hearts.

[20 : 53] Someone told me on my first day studying at seminary that the reason why all the books are spread all around the building is that they tried to put them all in one room and the floor fell through.

That's not true, but there are a lot of books. I'm sure if they tried putting them all in one room, the floor would fall through. But how many of those thousands of thick theological books would I have to read and know and quote to truly understand my need of forgiveness and personally receive God's grace and kindness?

Well, surely it's just one book, just his book. Again, reading and knowing our doctrine and theology is good, but if we love God's truth, well, let's never let it become a fancy cover for our sin.

Surely there is no worse use of God's word. Brothers and sisters, we may not presume outright on God's grace, but none of us are ever immune from taking God's grace for granted.

So let's watch for those seeds of pride growing up in our hearts and freely confess and repent when we find them. More briefly, as we close, narrowing that question down even further, the last part of Jonah's prayer asks us, do we have pride over God's rescue, over his rescue?

[22 : 31] Read with me his prayer from verse 7. Jonah prays, when my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you to your holy temple.

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them, but I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good, I will say, salvation comes from the Lord.

Now on the surface, again, Jonah seems to be saying God's rescue is his wonderful work. A bit before our reading in verse 6, but you, O Lord, brought up my life from the pit.

Or indeed, verse 9, those wonderful words, salvation comes from the Lord. But if we were to ask Jonah, why? Why did God save you? What would his answer be?

What does he say his answer is? Look at this pride sandwich. Here's the bread and butter. Verse 7, I remembered you, O Lord, and my prayer rose to you.

[23 : 38] And then to top it off, verse 9, I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed, I will make good. But look at the filling.

Verse 8, those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. This is a pride sandwich church, because it is topped and tailed with what he thinks he has brought or given or done to God, but filled with a wholly dismissive attitude towards other people who he thinks can't possibly have anything to bring or do or give to God.

But what is missing from this prayer is any recognition at all that there is no difference between God's rescue of him and his rescue of the really evil sinners over there.

The truth is both Jonah and Nineveh are wholly undeserving. Both have nothing whatsoever to give to God.

Both are sinners saved by grace. The huge irony, of course, is that we know that the idol worshipping sailors on the surface don't live up to Jonah's caricature.

[25 : 00] Jonah is wrong. They did turn to the Lord. They were saved. But because Jonah didn't bother to speak to them about God's rescue, well, he wouldn't know about that, would he?

Jonah seems to think his religious lifestyle, his prayers, his sacrifices, his vows, his devotion to the temple, makes him somehow worth more to God, more worth saving than those people.

But God has proven him wrong, and he is going to prove him wrong again next week. We might not think or pray so boldly or bluntly as Jonah, but if we have forgotten that the only difference between ourselves and the five million people in Scotland, or the billions of people in our world who don't know the Lord is God's grace alone, then we are at risk of this pride.

If it seems any less incredible or scandalous to us that we ourselves should be here, then if our unbelieving friends or family should come and put their trust in the Lord, we are in danger of this pride.

It's subtler sometimes than saying outright, I was good enough or I did it. It's the quiet suggestion in the back of our hearts that it was easier for God to save me than it would be for God to save them.

[26 : 40] It's a subtle pride that can show up in the way that we pray or don't pray perhaps for our non-Christian friends, in the way we speak or don't speak to our non-Christian neighbors about God's rescue.

But it's a pride that denies what God is teaching Jonah and therefore what God is teaching us through this book, that salvation belongs not to us but to him.

Jonah's prayers end with the famous word salvation comes from the Lord. But as one writer puts it, no other words could summarize better all that God has done for him, yet it is this very same fact that fills him with intense anger in the final chapter of this book.

In other words, if we can't see something terribly ironic about Jonah's praying those words, we will have missed the point that this chapter is here to teach us.

Perhaps this prayer has been less comfortable to look at than perhaps we're used to. Seeing Jonah's prayer in such a negative light isn't instinctive to us.

[27 : 56] We like to see the prophet as the hero of the book. It helps to remember that Jonah is not the hero of this book, because what he says is true, salvation belongs to the Lord, therefore the Lord is the hero of this book.

We so often think of Jonah as a book where God goes to rescue the great evil city, that we can miss the far greater lengths that God has to go to to rescue his own prophet.

Which should cause us to ask, finally, how much further than by far has God gone to rescue me and you? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all to die the death we richly deserve for our sin, for our pride, our thanklessness, our lack of love, for all the times we have tried to bury our sin, for all the times we have doubted whether this person or that person could ever become a Christian, for the times we have thought of ourselves somehow worth more of God's time than the lost people who live around us.

Brothers and sisters, God's grace in Jesus Christ is big enough even, even for me, even for ye. How much bigger then is his love towards a sinful world than we could ever truly imagine?

God's love, this is the ultimate cure for our pride and our presumption, to fill our hearts again and again with God's character, how he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, full of steadfast love, and day by day by day thank him, thank him for his undeserved kindness to us who do not deserve

it, to renew our belief each day that salvation belongs to the Lord.

[30 : 07] And out of the overflow of our hearts, taken up in awe of his grace towards us, to go gladly to tell others about him and about his full and free salvation in Christ.

So let us come to him and take refuge in his grace this evening and repent where we need to of our pride, and go from here with our hearts overflowing with thanks to our creator and our redeemer, our God and savior.

Let's pray together. God, our father, how we thank you that even when we were dead in sin, you loved us with a great love.

We thank you that when we were unlovely, you looked on us with immense love. And Lord, we still to this day do not deserve your grace.

We cannot earn your kindness. The fact that we are here is incredible. father, keep that truth fresh for us each and every day we pray.

[31 : 34] Keep us, we pray, from pride. Keep us, we pray, from taking for granted this immense gift of grace. How we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ who says he came to seek and to save the lost.

Father, such were we, and the Lord Jesus has brought us in. How we pray then, our Father, that he would bring in so many more.

Help us, we pray, to share his heart for the lost. Help us, we pray, never to look down upon others, to doubt that you could do for them what you have done for us.

keep us, we pray, with our eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ who shows us who you truly are, full of grace, slow to anger, abounding in love.

Refresh us, we pray, in your grace, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.