

PRAYER THAT PLEASES GOD

Jonah 2:1-10 & 1 Timothy 2:1-6

Key Verse: 1 Timothy 2:3-4, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

Last year, I struggled to really hear God’s voice and leading in the many, many decisions that had to be made during COVID. I felt my prayer life is not deep enough. This year I took Colossians 1:9 that my prayer life may grow deeper, till I could have the knowledge of his will through the wisdom and understanding his Spirit gives. So I initially wanted to say no to giving a prayer message but every time I drafted the email to say no, the Spirit wouldn’t let me send it, so here we are. I read two books at the beginning of this year to learn about prayer, “Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God” by Tim Keller and “Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing God’s Will” by Dr. Henry Blackaby—both which I highly recommend. I’ve been greatly convicted and challenged by Dr. Blackaby’s book that we must pray to find what God is already doing in our world and adjust our lives to his calling—that rather than asking, “What is God’s will for my life?” We should ask “What is God’s will?” God led me to the book of Jonah, a prophet who heard God’s calling in prayer to help a pagan city to repent but Jonah rejected God’s mission and ran away—literally in boat. God sent a storm and giant fish to swallow him. In the fish for 3 days, Jonah repented and prayed again. He preached God’s message to the pagan city, they repented and Jonah became so angry he wanted to die. I thought I would preach a message on what happens when we reject God calling in prayer. However, as I began to study the book of Jonah, I realized that the real message of Jonah is God’s compassion for all people of the world. This greatly moved me to begin to pray for world mission. In 1 Timothy Paul exhorts that the first priority for the church should be to pray for the salvation of all people. I pray that we may learn the heart of God through these passages and join with him in praying for the world.

The first verse of the book of Jonah says, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.” Jonah was a prophet in the time of king Jeroboam II near the end of the ministry of Elisha, who would likely have been trained then in the schools of the prophets. It doesn’t say how the word of the Lord came to Jonah. But in the case of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Daniel at least, the Bible clearly says the word of the Lord came through prayer, through times of talking with God. God speaks to his people in prayer. Someone counted that there are over 2000 instances of God speaking to his people in the Old Testament. Many dismiss God’s voice as their imagination, while others wish God would speak to them and give them direction. Dr. Blackaby says that the key to knowing God’s voice is a love relationship, “Recognizing God’s voice comes from an intimate love relationship with him. You become familiar with God’s voice as you experience him. As God speaks and you respond you will recognize his voice more and more readily. Some people try to bypass the love relationship. They look for a miraculous sign, or set out a “fleece” (see Judg. 6), or try a formula to discover God’s will. But there is no substitute for an intimate relationship with God.”¹

In prayer, Jonah heard God’s clear calling on his life, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish ...to flee from the Lord” (2-3). Tarshish was probably a port in southern Spain so instead of going 500 miles north to Nineveh, he went 2000 miles in the opposite direction. Jonah basically turned in his

¹ Henry Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, Claude King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville, TN, B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 139

resignation letter and said “I quit God.” When God asked him to preach against Nineveh, God’s intention was clear: God wanted them to repent and receive God’s forgiveness. And that’s just what happens. So afterward Jonah angrily prays, “That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2). Jonah had previously prophesied that God would give Israel victory and Jeroboam II would restore the boundaries of Israel to what they had been in David’s time (2 Ki 14:25). He was happy to preach salvation in a time of great wickedness in Israel. But when God wanted to show the same undeserved grace to Nineveh—a rising superpower nation known for its cruelty, idolatry and wickedness—to Jonah this seemed very wrong (4:1). Jonah was very immature in his understanding of God’s love. He thought that God should only love good people who deserve it. Because he did not know God’s love for him and for others he could not participate in God’s work. How about us? Do we hope God will judge North Korea? Iran? Russia? China? Do we have any hesitation about who we will preach the gospel to?

When Jonah ran away from God’s calling, he also ran away from God himself. Of course no one can run from God, God is everywhere—Jonah knew this—but when we reject God’s direction in any part of our life, we also begin in a way to hide from God, to shut God out. Like when someone asks us to do something and we forget and then they call us—what do we do? We ignore them. But it’s more serious when we don’t respond to the Lord’s call, we are saying “You’re not my Lord, I’ll do what I want”—that’s rebellion and it breaks our relationship with God. As we’re discussing prayer, we should understand that there are a number of things in the Bible that God says will hinder our prayers, so that God will not listen to us. Proverbs 28:9 says, “If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.” Psalm 66:18 says “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened [to my prayers]” Mark 11:25 says “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” We cannot live in rebellion to God and expect that he will listen to our prayers.

Look at verses 4-12. When Jonah didn’t obey God’s revealed will in prayer, his life stopped. Though he made his own plans for his life, those plans were frustrated and ended in failure (4). God sent a great storm that stopped them dead in the water and the harder they tried to fight it (5b), the more stuck they became going in circles and going nowhere (11, 13). The pagan sailors all began to desperately pray, but Jonah fell into a deep sleep (5b). He couldn’t pray anymore after what he had done. He wanted to forget but how could he forget. He believed he was banished from God’s sight (2:4a) and fell into despair and self-condemnation and he believed the only way to escape the storm was for him to die (12)—it sounds very much like depression. However, while Jonah was unwilling to save pagan Ninevites, the pagan sailors did everything they could to save his life (12-13). While he could not pray, they cried out to the Lord to forgive them, as they threw Jonah into the sea (14). Jonah believed “God is punishing me.” But imagine what the rest of Jonah’s life would have been like if God let him go to Tarshish. Clearly it was our Father God’s loving discipline to bring Jonah out of a dead life and into true life (1 Ti 6:19).

Verse 17-2:1 say, “Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.” Hopefully, we may not need to reach such a point to repent and pray. Can you imagine what it was like inside a fish? Wrapped in total darkness, half submerged, the stench of fish and seaweed filling your every breath, the fish twisting and turning going deeper and deeper. At literally rock bottom, he says, “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” In that moment he remembered, that the LORD is compassionate, that he would forgive him. This hope broke through his pride and he prayed, “In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me...I called for help, and you listened to my cry” (2:2). No matter what we’ve done, when we turn to God in repentance, he hears our

cry. Jonah accepted God's sovereignty in disciplining him, he prayed, "YOU hurled me into the sea..." not the sailors, "YOUR waves and breakers swept over me" (3). Though he felt he had been rightly banished from God's sight, but he responded with hope, "yet I will look again toward your holy temple" (2:4). It was a decision to turn himself back towards a relationship with God through prayer.

Jonah expressed a deep recognition of God's grace, "The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head." [Like a mummy] "To the roots of the mountains I sank down;" "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever" (6 ESV). From inside the fish he couldn't have known what was happening, he must have waivered between life and death feeling he was sinking down into Sheol, the pit, the realm of the dead. He felt like the bars of hell had closed him in an eternal prison. "But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit" (5-6). In order to really understand grace, we must recognize what we have been saved from. Jonah acknowledged that he had descended to the pit of hell where he deserved to be imprisoned forever. "But you LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit." Jonah switches from the LORD, to MY God. "But you, LORD MY GOD." When we know God's grace on our life, he goes from being God to MY God.

From this deep realization of God's grace Jonah vowed to return to the Lord and his calling as a prophet. "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them" (8) or "forfeit the mercy that could be theirs" as some translate it. "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'" (9). Obeying God's calling in our life is the response to God's personal love for us, the response to his grace. When we realize that salvation belongs to God alone and he is the one who saved us not man, not myself, not my righteousness or my law keeping, but God alone, then we are full of God's grace and thanksgiving. From this place we naturally want to begin serving God and we trust in his calling.

The God of second chances commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land (3:1). God again gave him his calling to go to Nineveh and this time Jonah obeyed immediately out of love for God (3:2-3). Well Jonah went and preached a one sentence sermon, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be over-thrown" (4) and everyone from the king to lowest beggars prayed and turned from the evil ways and 120,000 people were saved in one day (5-9).

How could rebellious, reluctant Jonah have such ministry success? This gets us into what I mentioned at the beginning about joining God in HIS work. History tells us that the Assyrians had been tied up in wars, there were revolts in the empire, widespread famine and in the midst of it all, an auspicious eclipse of the sun. God was working to humble this wicked nation and create an opportunity. When the time was ripe God called Jonah into the work that he had already been preparing. And so we see an outcome only God could have accomplished.

God is not just God of the "good people" but God is working everywhere in the world, doing things that we have no idea about, creating opportunities for people to be saved. And God is looking for people who he can call to those places. But when Jonah saw that God relented from destroying them he did not rejoice, he became so angry he wanted to die. He seems almost satirical but in fact he is a reflection of the nation of Israel. They had been loved so much and they had been called to share that love with the world. But they believed to preserve their faith, they must build walls and keep it to themselves.

Then how is God challenging us to participate in his heart for the world? Fast forward some 700 years, to Paul's instructions for the Christian Church in 1 Timothy. I think we'll see here the modern application of the lesson that we learned in the book of Jonah. Let's read 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "I urge, then, first of all, that

petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” So Paul is saying to Christians that when we come together in church there is one thing that is of first priority. What is it? It is singing. No. It’s the sermon—the sermon is important, thank you for not sleeping during my message. But no. What does he urge is the first priority: Prayer. Prayer is the first priority when we come together in worship. What is the shortest part of our worship? In fact, some people leave early and skip this part: prayer. Paul says it is first priority in the church to pray many kinds of prayers when we come together. And the church should be praying on behalf of all people. God said to the prophet Isaiah, “my house will be called a house of prayer.” Often we pray a list of my personal needs and perhaps the needs of those I care about. But God is saying that this is too narrow, too selfish, our heart is too small. Like Jonah our understanding of God’s love is too immature. God wants us to pray for ALL people.

Peter said that God saved us to make us a royal priesthood. In the Jewish context, do you know what was the most beautiful part of the priest’s garment? It was the ephod made of solid gold embedded with huge priceless gems that represented the people he carried on his heart to God in prayer. To the priest all people were like precious gems, they were to be on his heart and he was to pray for them. His prayer could save their life, avert plague, save from disaster, bring repentance and restoration. It is not easy to pray for all people, because all people includes “that guy,” “those women,” “that country,” “that racial group,” and frankly our human love is too small to go there. To make things even harder, God says as a subset of all people, we are to pray for the government—what the government! I can’t stand that president! that mayor! that senator! Like Jonah, we may think we can curse them by withholding our prayers. But do you think things will get better if you DON’T pray? They’ll get worse! We pray so “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Like them or not, God says when they prosper we all prosper—we have a priestly duty to pray for them (Jer 29:7).

Look at verse 3. “This is good, and pleases God our Savior.” To pray like this is good, because it grows us in God’s heart. God loves all people, God is OUR Savior. Agape the word used in Greek for God’s love, is the natural empathy and lovingkindness humans intrinsically feel towards all other humans. To grow in agape love is not, like Jonah, to become more judgmental people, or more exclusive people. But like Christ, to unselfishly give our life for the blessing and salvation of all people—not just nice looking students and white-collar people like us but ALL people.

As we obey God’s exhortation here, to pray for “all people,” it is our heart that is transformed. Like Jonah to really embrace God’s heart we must be transformed. I heard two separate stories this week from 2 people who struggled when they went on mission trips to Russia many years ago. One person found that as he prepared to go, fear from his upbringing toward red communist Russia made him reconsider going on his mission trip. Another person agreed to go but then when he considered Russia’s role in the destruction of his country, hatred boiled up in him so that he could not love Russians. It hits home for us because we have dear brothers in Ukraine right now who are being seriously threatened by Russia. But each of these people prayed and God showed them his love for the people of Russia and uncovered their wrong heart attitudes. When they began to pray for Russia, their hearts were transformed and in the place of fear and hatred was a dedicated and enduring love for the Russian people that has lasted till now. Our human love is too limited. We must pray that God may help us to have HIS love. I want you to ask God right now to reveal to you who are the people that you cannot love. Pray for them.

Let’s read verses 3-4, “This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” God does not WANT to judge the earth as some think, but he WANTS to save all people. Ezekiel 33:11 says, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure

in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" God is always seeking and saving the lost. Therefore, God's heart is world mission. God exhorts us "pray...for all people...this is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved..." The implication is that God is using our prayers to save all people. One person said: we're limited humanly in where we can go but through prayer we can go to the ends of the earth. Therefore, it is God's command that a church must have a vibrant prayer for the salvation of all people of the world.

Ezekiel 22:30 says, "I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one." God is looking for someone to stand in the gap but often he can find no one. Verses 5-6 tell us that Jesus bridged the gap between God and man by becoming the ransom for all people. It is Jesus who stands in the gap to intercede on their behalf (Ro 8:34). When we stand in the gap, we are participating in the work of Jesus to save all mankind. We do not pray on our own but we become part of what God is doing to save all people.

As I told you, this passage came as a total surprise to me. When God led me to Jonah I thought I was going to write about one thing and I discovered this deeply convicting message about the need to pray for world mission. You know, I've always taken the stand that we need to think and pray locally about the problems here, not looking out to the horizon—especially we need to be present and active in our families. But I was deeply convicted by God's command to pray for world mission. I since made several very small but definite adjustments to my prayer life. I began to read the world mission prayer topics that are sent to us—I'm very ashamed to say I didn't read them before. I began to circle the world mission prayer topics in the bulletin that I want my kids to pray for and we started adding world mission prayer to our nightly prayer time, in addition to all the sick and struggling in Chicago that we always pray for. And I began to read world news with an eye for things to pray for and so we began praying for Ukraine before it was announced. These are small things but this is how God will transform our hearts, open our eyes to his work, and help us to participate in what he is doing.

I want to leave us with the last verse of the book of Jonah. It says, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (4:11). He leaves the question hanging, unanswered. And as such every reader of the book must ask themselves if God SHOULD have compassion on the unbelieving world that doesn't know what it is doing. Shouldn't I as God care for the people of the world? If the answer seems obviously yes, then shouldn't we care? Well, though Jonah ends on a cliffhanger, we have the book of Jonah in our hands. It means Jonah didn't sit there angrily until he died. Jonah must have finally gotten it. He went home and wrote this book to challenge us to think about God's compassion for the world and our lack of compassion. I pray that like Jonah, like me, you may let God transform your heart as you join Jesus in praying for world mission.