

It's difficult to imagine a worse situation to be in than Jonah is in right now. Because he's there in the belly of a fish. And it's dark. It's smelly. It's claustrophobic. And he's surrounded on all sides by water and by the sea. There's really no way to get out. For all intents and purposes, Jonah is effectively dead. What hope does he have there in the heart of the sea? Where can he turn to find any kind of deliverance? And yet, Christians, it's interesting that Jonah here prays in the belly of that fish. In fact, he not only prays while he's in the fish, he also gives thanks, giving thanks to the Lord for all the things that he has done, giving thanks to the Lord for all the things that he's going to do, giving thanks to the Lord because he's going to deliver him. And we might stop and say, "Well, now hold on a second. That doesn't make any sense. What is there to give thanks for? He's in the fish. You can't be in a worse situation. What is there possibly that can be good in this situation?" And yet Jonah still prays and gives thanks to the Lord, and he teaches us through this example what it means for us to pray too, to pray in every circumstance, to pray even when all hope seems lost. Because Jonah is there giving thanks, and when we recognize why he's there and how he got there and also how he's looking at this situation, that will teach us something about prayer too. So let's focus then on what is happening to Jonah here in the heart of the sea.

Jonah is, of course, in the previous chapter running away from God. We know that. He has sinned a great sin. But because of his sin, the judgment of God is falling upon him. God is punishing him for that sin. We know this already in the storm itself, the storm which God has sent upon the sea. This is a call of God to repent of his sin. But yet, even here when God also causes him to be thrown into the sea, Jonah also experiences God's wrath. Because to be thrown into the sea, Christians, is to experience judgment, is to experience death itself. We know this because Jonah himself explains it to us. He says, for example, in verse two: "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice." To be in the sea is to be in the belly of Sheol. The belly there that he's talking about is not the belly of the fish. We want to make that very clear right away. And we know that because right after this verse in verse three, he says: "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." So in other words, it is the sea itself that is the belly of Sheol, not the fish. That's something else altogether different. And so for Jonah to be in the belly of Sheol, to be in the sea is to be cast into God's judgment. More than this still, Sheol is the place of death in the Old Testament, the place where all the dead, good and bad alike, go. It is effectively the grave. So for Jonah to be cast into the sea is to be thrown into the grave, is to be thrown into death. He has been cast into the judgment of God.

He also goes on to explain this a little further when he talks in verse six about the pit. He says in verses five and six: "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." This pit is also the grave. This pit is also Sheol. He is effectively saying that this land to which he is going is the land of the dead, the land where all must go. To go down into this land whose bars are going to close on him forever is to go into death from which there is no return. So through all of his prayer, Jonah shows us that to be thrown into the sea itself is a judgment from God, a judgment of death.

But it gets worse than that. Because not only is he suffering there in the heart of the sea, he is also suffering because God has put him there. We hear this in verse three especially, where he

says: "You cast me into the deep." You did it! You, God, cast me into the deep. "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.'" So in other words, what Jonah is saying here is that God himself has cast him into the sea. God himself has cast him off. And that's a far worse judgment, to be abandoned by God, than to suffer anything else in all the world. We hear this, for example, from Jesus himself when he is suffering on the cross. And he cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment, Jesus shows us that he is abandoned by the Father, turned away from by God himself. And because he is suffering that judgment, it is far worse to him than the cross or anything that he has to suffer. To have God become your enemy is a worse thing than to suffer anything in this life. So that's what Jonah is dealing with here, Christians, not only to be in the heart of the sea, to be in death itself, but also to be cast off by the Lord. Where will he find hope in the midst of this? Where can he turn for help?

Yet God sends him help. God sends him deliverance by sending him the great fish. That's what we hear at the end of the first chapter, where it says: "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." The great fish is not a sign of God's wrath. This is not part of Jonah's punishment. It is actually God's way of delivering him. Because think of it this way. If he didn't have the fish, he'd just be left out in the sea, left to die with no hope of ever escaping. But inside of that fish, he's alive. And so God is using the great fish in his mercy towards Jonah to bring him out from death, to bring him back to the land of the living. And it is for that reason that Jonah can give thanks to the Lord even in the belly of that fish.

This is why he says all throughout his prayer: "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress," that is, the distress of being in the sea, "and he answered me." Answered him by sending him the fish to save his life. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried," that is, the heart of the sea, the belly of the grave, "and you heard my voice." God heard his cries to him, even as he was struggling in the sea. "Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight.'" God had cast him off in his judgment. "Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple." God was going to deliver him. God was going to bring him out again. And he would see that temple with his own eyes. He knew that he would get out of this. He knew that he had a future, so that he could go back and see that temple which was God's promise to his people that he was, in fact, with them. Jonah could have that hope not only for this moment, but also for the days ahead. "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever," the land of death there in the sea, "yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God." God has raised him up out of death, out of the place of death to be with him in life forever. "And when my life was fainting away," there in the sea, "I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple." God answers his prayer by sending that great fish so that Jonah would survive. That fish is a sign of his love, and that is why Jonah can rejoice.

Now, how does he know that? It seems like a strange thing to rejoice in. How can he be so certain there in the belly of the fish? After all, we'd probably think that it was a terrible thing, right? To be cast into the sea and then to go into the belly of a fish? That seems like things are getting worse, not better! How can he be so confident that he can give thanks even there inside that great fish? Because of his faith, Christians. He has faith in God, faith that God is faithful to his promises. He sees when his eyes can't see there in the darkness of that great fish. He knows

that God is faithful and true, so that even here in the belly of the whale, his steadfast love endures forever. Even here in the belly of this great fish, Jonah can pray with confidence, because God is faithful and true.

And so Christians, this also gives us an example of what it means to have trusting prayer and why we too can be confident in our prayers. No matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, no matter what you may be going through, no matter what you may be struggling with, no matter what sea you have been cast into, the Lord hears your prayers. The Lord will answer those prayers, because he is faithful and true. And Jonah trusted in the Lord even there in the belly of that fish, and he knew that God would keep his promises. And you have even more reason to trust him, Christians, than even Jonah had, because God has sent you his Son, Jesus Christ, the one who is greater than Jonah to give you confidence in the face of every circumstance. Jesus himself says that he will hear us when we pray to him. Jesus himself says that he will be with us even to the end of the age. Jesus himself died and rose again on the third day to show us that God is faithful and true, that God will keep his promises. And so, if Jesus has done all of these things for us, Christians, we have a firm foundation that we can hold on to and know that our prayers will be answered. And Jonah rejoiced that he was going to be able to see the temple, that promise that God was with them. And yet we have the greater temple, Jesus Christ, whose body is the temple. And because we have that greater temple, we can rejoice, knowing that God is with us always. After all, that's what Jesus' name is, right? Immanuel. "God with us."

And more than this, Christians, too, we have the Father who promises to hear us through his Son. And the Holy Spirit who not only gives us life, but prays with us. So that in all things, the Holy Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--helps us and hears us, so that we can be confident in the face of everything. We have a firm foundation which will never pass away.

So come, Christians. Pray to your Lord. Pray to the one who is faithful and true. Trust him, because he has shown you time and time again that he will keep his promises. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are with you and will be with you always. And we know this through Jesus Christ, who has given himself for us and has promised to hear us, so that we can rejoice just as Jonah did in the heart of the whale.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have promised to hear us through your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would strengthen us and help us always to trust in you, so that in every circumstance, no matter what we may be going through, we can know that you are always with us and will hear us; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.