



Jonah 2

Last month I preached two sermons with the title “When God Says No.” I believe that those are important lessons to be learned. In that message I said that Christians tend to view God as a divine slot machine—just pull the lever and get what you want.

Rich: You have been presented with a job offer.

Final Response needed by October 18th.
[Learn more about this position here](#)

Position Summary

Weekly: Receive 5,000
Hours: Flexible
Available Positions: One (1)

- Take Vacation Whenever you like
 - Unlimited sick Days.
 - No Dress Code
- Make Your Own Hours

If we do not have a response by 7:00pm EST, this position will no longer be available to you.

[Give us your response now](#)

Last week I received the most exciting email. I was offered a job paying \$5,000 per week with unlimited vacation, unlimited sick hours and I can work whenever I want. This is how we want prayer to function. We say the magic prayer words and the genie in the sky grants our wishes. That’s about as likely to happen as me as me landing this job.

So I do believe that we need to understand God’s will, how he works and therefore how this affects our prayer life. God does say no but God also says yes.

The entire second chapter of the book of Jonah is a prayer. Last week I pointed out that Jonah did not pray in the first chapter. He disobeyed, ran away, slept and resigned himself to death, but he never once prayed. But once he was

thrown into the tempestuous sea, the prayers begin to flow. This leads us to our first principle.

1. **Pray when you are in distress.** (1-2, 7)

Jonah’s prayer is the classic foxhole kind of prayers. The old saying goes that there are no atheists in foxholes. When your life is hanging in the balance, even the least religious person seems to get more spiritual. We shouldn’t be too hard on Jonah because we tend to be the same

way. We also tend to be foxhole kinds of Christians. We do tend to pray more when trouble strikes.

But Jonah was not merely in distress, he was dying. These were his final moments, literally his final breath of air as he sank lower in the raging sea. Let's make sure that we understand the level of his distress. Let's back up to verse fifteen of chapter one to get the context.

15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying,

If you recall, Jonah told the sailors to throw him into the sea. He knew the sea was raging due to his sinful actions. He knew that God was in control and was sending him a message, so the sailors reluctantly agreed to throw him overboard. Remember—the sailors were pagans. They had cried out to their gods and they cast lots to find the guilty party. They were full pagans but it would seem that they did not practice human sacrifice. Sadly, some in the Old Testament who were supposed to be following the Lord practiced this despicable act. We see the full wickedness of men like King Manasseh.

He erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them...he burned his son as an offering (2 Kings 21:3,6).

Manasseh offered his own son as a human sacrifice, probably burned alive in a pagan fire. He was as bad as you could get. But even these pagan sailors were extremely reluctant to offer Jonah as a human sacrifice and prayed to Yahweh, that he would not hold their guilt against them.

The text tells us that Jonah prayed this prayer from the belly of the fish but most of this prayer took place in the sea itself. As he prays, see if you can feel Jonah sinking deeper and deeper.

*“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.*

*3 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.*

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

*5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
6 at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;*

Can you feel him sinking? The waves and billows passed over me; the waters closed in; the deep surrounded me; weeds wrapped about me, bars closed upon me. Jonah was finished. But at the last possible moment, his prayer was answered.

*yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.
7 When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!”*

So the question is, did Jonah pray from the belly of the fish as verse one says or did he pray as he sank to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, as verse seven states? Yes. Both were true. His prayer of desperation was uttered as he was sinking. But he also prayed from the belly of the fish. The fish’s belly is where the inspiration for this chapter came from. If you have ever done any writing, you know what writer’s block feels like. You think and pray and think and read and study, yet no new words appear on your page. From the belly of the fish, Jonah’s words flowed freely. Did he speak these exact words from the belly of the fish? He obviously wrote them down later but we should take verse one at face value—Jonah prayed this prayer surrounded by fish guts. Have you ever been that desperate when you prayed? He prayed the ultimate prayer of desperation.

This is why we should go easy on him here. Of course he prayed. We all tend to pray when we’re caught up in a time of distress. In fact, this is exactly what God wants us to do. God wants us to pray in times of deep distress. This is especially true in light of our next principle.

2. Consider that God may have placed you in distress. (3)

Jonah knew this was true. In chapter one he said to the sailors, *“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”* And here in chapter two he wrote,
*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.*

From Jonah's perspective, God effectively threw him overboard. Jonah called the sea *your* waves and *your* billows as if they belonged to God. Do you think Jonah was right or was this just the cries of a desperate man? Did God effectively throw him overboard? Without a doubt he did. God was in control of every gust of wind. Every wave of the sea obeyed him. God intentionally placed Jonah in distress so that he would call out on him.

But does God really do that? We had a discussion last year about this in a youth study. I asked the group if they thought that God would actually break an arm or leg. At first, they said "No" God would not do that. But then I brought up the number of times that God sent a plague, a famine or war to his chosen people of Israel and the answer was changed to "Yes." We don't like to think about God purposefully causing us pain. The devil wounds and God heals, right? Isn't that how the world works? Not according to the Bible it isn't. Sometimes God causes pain to get our attention.

As much as I hate the Prosperity Gospel, Karen sent me an article this week that showed that I was guilty of espousing some of its beliefs.

As a parent you intuitively understand the need to protect your kids. But we can corrupt this love by refusing to allow them to experience trials. Often, our shallow understanding of biblical suffering is revealed in our parenting.

When we never allow our children to experience the natural consequences of their behavior, we are subtly preaching a different gospel. And when we refuse to give proper, corrective discipline, we are acting differently than our heavenly Father: "The Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb. 12:6).

For our family, some of the sweetest times of spiritual fellowship and growth have come after walking through a painful experience together. Rather than causing harm, these trials or discipline became a severe kindness from God.

Think for a moment about your parenting. Does your love seek to bubble-wrap your children and pain-proof their world? Or is it a wisdom-filled approach, allowing momentary trials designed for eternal maturity?¹

This article is not saying that God causes these pains and trials but the full record of Scripture would prove that this does happen. But the author is right. We spend an inordinate amount of time in protecting ourselves and our families from harm. Now don't get me wrong here. I am not saying that if your child falls down the stairs and has a compound fracture with a leg bone sticking out that you should sit them down and have a discussion about the theology of suffering and why this is the best thing that's ever happened to them. Actually, don't laugh. I was at the Boisens years ago when Caleb Rappl jumped in the barn and got a compound fracture in his arm. That's the way our church rolls—crazy and care free. Thankfully Caleb ended up fine after an

ambulance ride a bit of pain, but you get the point. If you are in distress, consider that God may have placed you there for a purpose, as he clearly did with Jonah.

3. **Know that God will answer at just the right time.** (5-6)

At what point was Jonah rescued? He was on the last bit of air in his lungs before God rescued him. A few more seconds and he would have drowned. God answered at just the right time.

Prayer requires waiting and perseverance. God fearing Jews waited centuries for their Messiah to arrive. From God's perspective, the answer to the prayer for the Messiah was always YES. Praying for the Messiah was like a long road stretching out before them. At the end of the road was a "yes" answer to their prayers. The Messiah would come, but before they got to the "yes" answer, in between was a whole lot of "not yet" answers. If God answers your prayers with a "not yet" it is not the same thing as "no" answer. "Not yet" is merely a delayed "yes." The yes may be coming but you can't see it yet.

4. **Repentance is a vital part of prayer.** (9)

At its core, Jonah's prayer was a prayer of repentance.

*8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.*

*9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;*

what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

Jonah was wrong and he knew it, which is why he told the sailors to throw him overboard. As he was sinking, he not only cried out to the Lord in his distress, but he cried out in repentance. Isn't it strange that he did not repent while still on the ship? Wouldn't that have impressed the pagan sailors even more if they witnessed Jonah repent and then the storm immediately calmed? It really was almost too late for Jonah. If not for being swallowed by God's sovereign mercy, it would have been too late for him.

Here's a sad story of someone who did not cry out for God on his deathbed. Sir Francis Newport died on the day of my birth, September 19, in 1708. He had been the head of the English Infidels Club. He lived to the ripe old age of 88 but suddenly became very sick and wasted away in just a few days. Here are some of the words from his death bed.

"Would you be informed why I am become a skeleton in there or four days? See then how I have despised my Maker and denied my Redeemer; I have joined myself to the atheists and profane, and continued this course under many convictions, till my iniquity was ripe for vengeance and the just judgment of God overtook me when my security was the greatest and the checks of my conscience were the least."²

"You need not tell me there is no God for I know there is one, and that I am in His presence! You need not tell me there is no hell. I feel myself already slipping. Wretches, cease your idle talk about there being hope for me! I know I am lost forever! Oh, that fire! Oh, the insufferable pangs of hell! ...Oh, that I could lie for a thousand years upon the fire that is never quenched, to

purchase the favor of God and be united to Him again. But it is a fruitless wish. Millions and millions of years will bring me no nearer the end of my torments than one poor hour. Oh, eternity, eternity forever and forever! Oh, the insufferable pangs of Hell!”³

A modern day atheist, Christopher Hitchens, author of the book, “God is Not Great,” also refused to repent on his deathbed. While suffering from terminal cancer, he told one interviewer: “No evidence or argument has yet been presented which would change my mind. But I like surprises.” He also said, “If I convert it’s because it’s better that a believer dies than an atheist does.”⁴ Hitchens did not even want believers to pray for him. He said don’t bother to “trouble deaf heaven with your bootless cries, unless, of course, it makes you feel better.”⁵

After he passed, Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary tweeted, “The point about Christopher Hitchens is not that he died of unbelief, but that his unbelief is all that matters now. Unspeakably sad.”⁶

Times of distress are the best times not only to cry out to God but to cry out to him in repentance. God may have put you in distress for this very purpose. The founder of Campus Crusade, Bill Bright, referred to repentance as “spiritual breathing.” When you exhale, you confess your sin—agree with God concerning your sin and thank Him for His forgiveness of it. Confession involves repentance—a change in attitude and behavior. When you inhale, you are saying that by faith, you surrender the control of your life to the Holy Spirit. You trust that He now directs and empowers you.⁷

By the way, when repentance is part of your prayer, God always says yes. I don’t mean that you repent in order to get something but he always receives true repentance from the heart. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

5. God’s answer may not as you supposed. (6)

The truth is that even when God does say YES, the answer may not be as you supposed it would be. Take Jonah for example. When Jonah cried out to God, what did the answer to his prayer look like? *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.* God answered with a fish! Jonah was drowning, being pulled down into the deep. The water was death so God answered by sending a fish to swallow him! The water was death but the fish was salvation.

I wonder how many times we have received an answer to a prayer and not even realized it because it did not look like we thought it would. Our first principle is to pray when you are in distress, but could it be that the distress itself could actually be an answer to prayer? Let’s say that you were praying to be more Christ-like. You want to be like Christ but you have this area in your life and you know it needs to be sanctified. This is one of your weak spots. So you pray about it. Maybe you even pray fervently and consistently. Then one day you break your arm. That is painful and it’s a form of distress. Maybe you are discouraged by this because now you can’t golf for 6-8 weeks. Maybe it concerns you because you’re a carpenter and now you won’t get paid for the next 6-8 weeks. But what if this time of distress is actually part of the answer to your prayer to be more Christ-like? Can a broken arm help you to be more like Jesus? Of course

it can, in the same way that being thrown overboard in a raging storm can get your attention. Imminent death tends to do that to a person.

Maybe the broken arm is your great fish that God sent to save you from something worse? It's no fun to be stuck in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights but it beats drowning, right? It's no fun to have a broken arm but maybe it is for your greater good. We are puny creatures yet God allows us the privilege of asking for things in prayer. The God of the universe listens and answers. Instead of always assuming that God has not answered our prayer or answered it by saying NO, we need to look more closely and have eyes to see answers to our prayers that we had failed to recognize.

6. Trust that God uses prayer and circumstances for his purpose. (10)

Jonah's prayer reminds us that in his infinite power, God is weaving his purposes together through prayer and circumstances. Yes, Jonah was desperate, but all prayer is a form of desperation. Otherwise, why pray? If you have the resources within yourself to solve all of your problems, then you don't need God. This is the default setting for most Christians. But if you have even one issue that you cannot solve on your own from your own resources and strength, then by definition, you are desperate. So if all prayer is a plea of desperation, then can we not trust God to use prayer and circumstances to accomplish his purposes in us? Whether God answers our prayers with a Yes or a No—either way, you and I are swallowed by God's mercy.

Rich Maurer
October 25, 2015

¹ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-ways-you-might-be-teaching-your-kids-the-prosperity-gospel>

² <https://books.google.com/books?id=8F9W4k2aqeUC&pg=PA529&lpg=PA529&dq=francis+newport+infidels&source=bl&ots=S9Age8Cg5Q&sig=2IVyCHCG9HptaSysRmnPaGMWrTg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB4Q6AEwAGoVChMIve6f6eXTyAIVA5oeCh2reA50#v=onepage&q=francis%20newport%20infidels&f=false>

³ <http://www.christian-faith.com/quotes-of-dying-atheists-and-god-haters/>

⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/08/19/christopher-hitchens-last-words/>

⁵ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christians-grieve-death-of-christopher-hitchens-share-hopes-for-deathbed-conversion-65035/>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/albertmohler/status/147553598782455808>

⁷ <http://newlife.godresources.org/empowered/5-spiritual-breathing/#.ViorCLerS00>