Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

I’m sure many of you have seen a children’s picture Bible with Jonah sitting inside a whale, with a bit of seaweed stuck in his hair, some fish skeletons lying around, and the big Uvula of the whale’s throat hanging to one side. And in the next picture, he has shot out of the whale’s blow hole, and he sits atop two cascades of water for a moment, before he flubs down on to a beach, a bit wet and smelling of fish, but ready now to head to Nineveh, because he has learned his lesson ☺ Yes?

Well, first off, the Bible does not tell us that it was a whale; it just says a “*great fish*.” We think it must have been a whale to fit Jonah inside and also because the King James Version of the Bible uses the word “whale” in Matt. 12. But the Greek word translated there literally means “sea monster,” so ‘whale’ is a guess rather than a translation. And I have read all sorts of theories, during the week, from icthyologists – fish experts – about what sort of fish this could have been, and technical theories from doctors about How Jonah might have survived inside for three days. But we don’t need to spend anytime on those matters, because the God who created the universe in six days, and who made it possible for the Israelites to walk through the Red Sea on dry land, and who raised Jesus from the dead, can easily preserve Jonah’s life, for three days, inside whatever sort of fish He chose to use; end of story! And whether it’s here in Jonah or elsewhere in the Bible, you are going to have to humbly and joyfully accept the reality of God’s miraculous power!

So, we come today to what is clearly a critical part of the story of Jonah. Last Sunday we saw that because of Jonah’s disobedience, God “*hurled*” a storm at him. And because Jonah was on a ship, this put the sailors’ lives in jeopardy also. But Jonah told the sailors that the storm was his fault and that if they threw him overboard the storm would stop. And we saw that this was not Jonah repenting of his sin but preferring to die rather than obey the Lord. So eventually the sailors threw Jonah overboard and the sea did become calm. And we noted that while faithless Jonah sunk below the waves, these sailors became God-fearers as they worshipped the Lord on the boat.

Well, that brings us to our text and **Jonah’s Psalm**. And I have called it a Psalm because it is written in the poetry style of a Psalm, as you can see from how chapter 2 is laid out differently than the other chapters, and because Jonah used many words and images from the Psalms. And if you are familiar at all with the Psalms this will not surprise you because **the Psalms are God’s prayer book for distressed believers**! So, we want to take a close look at Jonah’s prayer Psalm. And as we do this we will see what is good about Jonah’s prayer but also where his prayer was weak or faulty. But we will also see how Jonah’s time in the fish is a type and sign of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And there is much here to instruct and challenge and comfort us. And we will see all this as we follow the three natural divisions of this part of the Jonah story, which are the **Providential Fish**, the **Prayerful Psalm**, and the **Puked-up Prophet**. But that last point, the puked-up prophet, will not be a full, stand-alone point, but the conclusion to the prayerful Psalm point. So this is a 2 ¼ point sermon ☺

1. So let’s begin with the **providential fish**.
   1. Last week one of our points was God’s sovereign activity. And we noted that sovereignty means total control of everything. And we see that here as we read that “the Lord **appointed** a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” So this fish being there and swallowing Jonah was not a random fluke; it was “appointed” by the Lord.
      1. Do you boys and girls remember the story of Daniel? Daniel and his friends lived at the royal palace in Babylon. And we are told that the King *appointed* certain foods and drink for those living in the palace. So the King gave an order about food and drink that was obeyed by the palace staff.
      2. And it is the same word used here. So we have already seen God hurl a storm at Jonah, which means that God ordered the wind to gust and blow against the sea, and it did. And we have already seen God order the lot to fall against Jonah, and it did. And here God gave an order that was obeyed by this great fish.
      3. And there is more of God appointing things in the story of Jonah. Turn over to ch. **4:6**, “*Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah*,” and **v7**, “*But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered*,” and **v8**, “*God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint*.”
      4. So God gave orders to fish and seeds and plants and worms and the wind, and all of these things were used of the Lord to accomplish His good purposes for the sailors and Jonah and the people of Nineveh.
      5. Now, because we have the Book of Jonah, there obviously came a time when Jonah **looked back and saw how God was at work in these events**. And that is often how it is with God’s fatherly providence; we can only see it when we look back at how events have unfolded. And this is why we need to continually preach to ourselves that our Father in heaven is at work in the big things and the little things of life.
      6. A magnificent hymn by William Cowper captured this truth very beautifully:

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.  
 Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will.  
 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.  
 His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower.*

* 1. So let’s look a little closer at the bitter tasting bud that Jonah had to ‘eat,’ that only later became a sweet flower. I want you to imagine Jonah flying though the air after the sailors hurled him overboard, and then the splash as he hit the water, and then the wetness of the sea, and then a sudden buffeting and crashing and darkness, which we know was him being swallowed by this great fish. It is incredible to think about. And while we have to remember that ch. 2 is a poem, if you look at **v2**, Jonah speaks about being in “*the belly of Sheol*,” and in v6 about going down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever, and “*the pit*.” And that is OT language that commonly speaks about the grave and the place of death.
     1. And it seems to me that while it would have become plain to Jonah that he had been inside a fish *after* he was vomited out, when he was inside the fish, it wouldn’t have been him sitting in some giant rib-lined, room-like space, where he could ponder and pray, as picture Bibles typically portray it, but him being wedged inside a totally dark and almost airless throat or stomach. So it is easy to imagine that Jonah’s first thought was not, “Oh, I must be in a fish,” but that he had died; that he was, literally, in the place of the dead.
     2. And note also that it’s not as if Jonah could check his glow in the dark watch to see how much time had passed. It would only have been after he was vomited out and discovered what day it was *then* that he worked out that he had been inside a fish for three days and three nights!
     3. Now, some of us are bound to be **claustrophobic** to one degree or another, which means that we don’t like being in enclosed spaces. Wouldn’t this would be your worst nightmare? Try and imagine being in a totally dark, wet, almost airless space for *three days and nights*!
     4. So thinking back to Cowper’s hymn, this surely was a bitter tasting bud if ever there was one! What an awful experience for Jonah to endure!
  2. But of course, there was an even more ‘bitter tasting bud’ than Jonah’s, wasn’t there. And I am referring to the crucifixion of Jesus, and His enduring God’s eternal wrath during those three hours of darkness, and His three days in the tomb. And that’s why we read from **Matthew 12** earlier, which links Jonah’s *like* a death and resurrection experience to Jesus’ *literal* death and resurrection. For while being wedged in a fish’s gullet for three days is a horrific thing to think about, it only gives us a beginning glimpse of the eternal and temporal horrors and torments that our Saviour endured over the three days and nights of His death and burial.
     1. And brothers and sisters, young people, and boys and girls, there are many reasons why we should often reflect on the horrors suffered by our Saviour. One very practical reason is that **it will help you in your struggle against sin**. A while ago I learned about a technique that US Special Forces soldiers use in the heat of battle. It is called **combat breathing** and it supplies the decision making part of the brain with more oxygen. And Christian counsellors have borrowed this technique and adapted it for those moments when we face the temptation to engage in a habitual sin – a sin that we keep committing. And they have given it the acronym **BRACE** – B is for **breathe**; breathe in through your nose for four seconds and breathe out through your mouth for four seconds. AC is for **accountability**; call someone who is helping you as an accountability partner, and E is for **exit**; flee that situation, one way or the other. But the R of BRACE is for **remember**; remember important biblical truths, like what Jesus suffered for your sins. So you fill your mind with His agonies, as a demonstration of His love for you, to ward off the lure of temptation. You ask yourself, How can I do this when Christ endured all that for me?
     2. And that is just one reason why we should think about what Jesus suffered for us.
  3. But the point of Cowper’s hymn is that the bitter bud of providence is always followed by a sweet flower.For Jonah that was surviving and receiving a second chance to obey the Lord’s command. For the Lord Jesus it was rising from the dead and ascending to heaven. And as we were reminded last week, the Catechism’s beautiful summary of Romans 8:28 is that God will turn to our good whatever adversity He sends us in this sad world.

1. Well, it was while he was inside the fish that Jonah prayed. So let’s turn our attention in the second place to Jonah’s **Prayerful Psalm**.
   1. We read in v1 that “*Jonah prayed to the Lord His God from the belly of the fish*.” And then we have the 8 verses of the prayer Psalm. And it is probably a Psalm *about Jonah’s prayer* that he composed some time after he had been vomited up.
      1. In the Psalm he writes about sinking down into the water – vv3&5, and believing he was dead or in the place of the dead – vv1&6, and calling on the Lord – v1, and his prayer coming to the Lord – v8, and being answered – v1, and his life being brought up from the pit – v6, and his commitment to offer sacrifices and vows at the temple – vv4&9. And it’s all in the past tense; it had all happened.
      2. So I like to picture Jonah walking from the beach to the nearest village and asking for a piece of parchment and a feather and ink, and after the people put their fingers on their noses and said, “Pawww, where have you been, mate?” they handed over the parchment and Jonah began writing down this prayer Psalm while it was fresh in his mind.
   2. But let’s take look at this prayer Psalm and note a few things that arise from it: In v1 we read: “*Then* *Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish*.”
      1. And I am sure that many of us will have wondered before about **the best posture for prayer**. Should we stand or sit or kneel for prayer? Eyes closed? Hands folded? And there is value in thinking about those things. But if Jonah could pray while he was wedged inside a fish’s belly, and have his prayer heard and answered, then prayer is clearly not tied to one specific posture.
         1. I won’t give you the whole thing but there is a well known humorous poem about the right posture for prayer where various ministers and deacons give their opinion before some nobody at the back of the room said,

*“Las’ year I fell in Hodgkin’s well, Head first,” said Cyril Brown,  
“With both my heels a-stickin’ up, My head a-[pointing] down;*

*“An’ I [done prayed] right [then] an’ there— Best prayer I ever said,  
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed, A-standin’ on mah head.”*

* + - 1. So you can pray standing or sitting or upside down or from inside a fish!
    1. And this leads us to our next observation, which is that **the essence of prayer is not posture or saying the right things but consciously entering into the presence of the Lord and talking with Him** – “*Jonah prayed to the Lord His God*.”
       1. And I have shared with you before that this truth transformed the prayer life of one preacher who had been taught to pray from a young age. He said that he had always understood prayer as about saying the right things, but “*there was little real thought of God, and no real approach to God … But the day came,” he wrote, “when I realized what real prayer meant, realized that prayer was having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from Him.*”
          1. And I can tell you that when I first read what this preacher wrote it had a huge impact on my own prayer life.
          2. So when you are about to pray, think about entering the throne room of heaven and having a personal audience with your Father in heaven. And remind yourself that He is eagerly leaning forward to listen to your prayers and to answer them and give you all that you need.
       2. So consciously enter into the presence of God when you pray.
    2. But note also that “Jonah prayed to the Lord ***his*** God.” This was the prayer of a believer; one who knew God as *his* Lord,
       1. This was not one of those ‘God, if you are out there and if you are real, please help me and then I will do this or do that for you’ type of prayers that many people have prayed in crisis situations. No, this prayer is like many similar prayers of the Psalms that were prayed to the God of covenant relationship.
       2. You have probably heard about **Psalm 88** before; it is known as the darkest Psalm. It is a long lament about being down in a pit and abandoned and alone and near death. It ends with these words: “*Darkness is my closest friend*.” But even that Psalm is addressed to the LORD, which is God’s covenant name; the Psalmist says, “*O Lord, God of my salvation*.”
       3. Do you pray to *your* Father in heaven, who is your *Father* through Jesus Christ?
  1. And yet, having noted what is good about Jonah’s prayer, there are also some problems here. And I can tell you that I am thankful that I only had this one sermon to prepare this week because I have spent a good chunk of the week wrestling with this matter. And that is because many commentators don’t recognize any weakness in this prayer and just gush about the whole thing. But it really seems to be weak or even faulty in some areas. And that is both in terms of what Jonah said and what he did not say.
     1. For notice what the prayer is about; it is about **Jonah’s distress** and his escape from this awful situation. There is no doubt that he was genuinely thankful that the Lord delivered him from this death-like situation. And he committed himself to the sacrifices and vows of worship. And remember that Jonah ministered in the Northern Kingdom, but he twice mentions the **holy temple** of the Lord, which was located in the Southern Kingdom. So unlike most of his countrymen, who had abandoned temple worship all together, Jonah knew that that the temple in Jerusalem was the only place to offer sacrifices to the Lord.
     2. But **what is Jonah’s prayer not about**? What does not get mentioned in this prayer? The very thing that led to Jonah being in the fish! There is no confession of sin. And he commits himself to go the temple but there is no commitment to go to Nineveh. In fact, as ch. 3 opens, you would expect to read that Jonah immediately headed to Nineveh. But the way it is written suggests that Jonah was not heading to Nineveh and needed to be told again that this was his duty!
     3. And there are three other things in the text that indicate that there was still much that Jonah needed to learn about God’s dealings with him and Gentiles, or Non-Jews:
        1. The first is **verse 8**. There we read, “*Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love*.” So thinking about Jonah’s situation, who would that be referring to? There are only two possibilities – the sailors on the ship who had just prayed to their gods – vain idols, and the people of Nineveh who worshipped vain idols. So Jonah is effectively saying I have been graciously delivered because I am a son of Israel; unlike those sailors and the people of Nineveh. But what did we see last week? While Jonah was sinking down in the water, the sailors were converted and became true worshippers of the Lord. But there just isn’t any room in Jonah’s heart for that possibility.
        2. And we see this also in how Jonah reacted when the people of Nineveh repented. He was furious. And do you remember what he did? He asked the Lord to take his life because he believed it was better for him to die than to live. It’s like his rescue from the fish and his prayer was totally forgotten. Jonah had zero pity for the people of Nineveh; he still didn’t want God to show mercy to non-Israelites.

1. And the third thing that exposes the weakness or lack in Jonah’s Prayer Psalm is the ¼ point of our sermon, which is the **Puked-up Prophet**. For in v10 we read that “*the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land*.”
   1. In **Leviticus 18:25**, the Lord said to the people of Israel, Do not commit sexual immorality of any kind, and do not offer your children as a fire sacrifice, and do not engage in homosexual activity, and do not engage in bestiality, or you and the land will become unclean and the land will vomit out its inhabitants. And this vomiting language is often repeated in the law, always with disgust and judgment connotations. So while I would not make this a hill to die on or a point of doctrinal orthodoxy, the fact that the Lord told the fish to vomit Jonah up, when there are other more pleasant ways that Jonah this could have happened or been described, suggests dissatisfaction or even disgust on the Lord’s part.
      1. In **1 Peter 3:7**, husbands are commanded to live with their “*wives in an understanding way, showing honour to [her]*.” And then we read this warning, “*So that your prayers may not be hindered*.” So if husbands do not love their wives, then the Lord, as it were, puts His hands over His ears and will not listen to his prayers for himself.
      2. And I believe that is what happened here; the fish vomiting Jonah out upon the dry land was the Lord, in effect, saying, Jonah, I hear your prayer and much of it is good and sincere, but you have not yet learned the lesson I am trying to teach you. So Mr fish! Puke him up! I will continue to deal with my servant Jonah in other ways.
   2. And while that may seem a bit unpleasant I hope you can see the grace and patience of God also. For when you think about it, do any of us pray as we should? Do we have perfect understanding of God’s will in every situation? No we do not. Are even our ‘best’ prayers free of all selfishness?
      1. The other day my daughter was describing the prayers that our 4 and 3 year old grandchildren prayed after dinner. The four year old is quite affected by the whole Covid19 situation so he prayed that the government would make wise decisions about level 2 and that people would not get sick and die. We thought, Wow! That’s so sweet and thoughtful! But the three year old girl? She prayed that she could have first turn on the Ipad after dinner.
      2. And which of those prayers do you think that many of our prayers sound like? The three year old, right?! And even if they are like the four year old’s prayers, part of our motivations will still be our own benefit in some way.
      3. And that is why it is so comforting to know what it says in **Romans 8:26**, “*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*.” And if that is not enough, a few verses later we read, “*Christ Jesus … is at the right hand of God … interceding for us*.” So one lesson from Jonah’s mixed-bag prayer is that God loves to receive and answer our mixed bag prayers because the Spirit and the Son intercede for us and transform our feeble efforts into magnificent prayer Psalms that the Father delights to answer.
   3. And all of this is also why the last line of Jonah’s prayer is so important: “*Salvation belongs to the Lord*.” Isn’t that encouraging? Isn’t that the best news ever!? Our salvation does not depend on our perfect prayers or our anything; it depends on Jesus’ work on the cross, and He said, “It is finished!” Hallelujah! Amen.