

Thanksgiving in the Belly of a Whale

I imagine some of you are asking, "Do you really believe a fish swallowed Jonah?" Well, equally devout Christians, who have an equally high view of the authority of Scripture, and who are equally intelligent disagree on the answer to that question. Some take the story literally. Others take the story as a parable or allegory. For me, the incredible thing is not that a fish should swallow a man but that, once there, the man should thank God. But that's exactly what Jonah did. From inside the fish Jonah thanked the Lord. "You listened to my cry. I will look again toward your holy temple. I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you."

Giving thanks in the belly of a fish! Is it really possible to thank God when everything is going wrong? Bad things do happen to good people but is it possible for good people to remain thankful when they're suffering with a terminal illness, when they've experienced the loss of a loved one, when they're in the depths of despair?

^{well} ~~Yes it is!~~ ^{it is} Jonah shows us that ~~is~~ possible. But let's be clear about this matter of thanksgiving. We don't thank God for misery. We don't thank God for cancer or strokes. We don't thank God for disease and death. They're all God's enemies. Christ came to destroy them. You don't thank God for his enemies. I once understood an enthusiastic preacher to tell his congregation that we're to thank God for everything. He used several outrageous illustrations. A couple had a daughter, he said, who ran away from home and became a prostitute. He counseled the couple to thank God that their daughter was a prostitute because the Bible says, "Give thanks always for all things (Eph. 5:20)." I understood him to say that we are to thank God for terrible tragedies, cancer, strokes and all these enemies of God. I don't believe that.

Christians are to thank God ~~in~~ all situations but we're not thankful

for all situations. God can work all things for good to those who love him but not all things are good. I don't believe God wants us to be thankful for all things absolutely. We thank God for the hope of being reunited with loved ones who have died but we don't thank God for the accident that takes the life of a young man in the prime of youth. When a young woman like Karen Quinlan lies in a coma for 10 years we may even thank God for her death but we don't thank God for what her parents suffered over the last 10 years and we don't thank God for the circumstances that led eventually to her death.

And yet Jonah really could be thankful for being swallowed by the whale. It kept him from running away from God. There's something worse than being swallowed by a whale. It's far worse to run away from God and ~~get away with it. Hell, I believe, is having our own way forever. It would~~ be hell, pure hell, always to get your own way. How terrible a parent would be if they let their kids get away with having their own way all the time. Jonah was like a child running away from God. He wanted everything his way but thank God for bringing him to his senses.

You've heard about how a farmer sometimes has to get the attention of a mule by hitting it over the head with a 2x4. Sometimes we can be quite mulish. Sometimes it takes getting hit over the head with a 2 x 4 before we begin to pay attention to God. It may be unemployment. It may be unpaid bills. It may be a rebellious child. It may be pregnancy out of wed-lock. It may be a malignancy. It may be the death of a loved one that hits us over the head. We don't thank God for the bad things but we can be thankful if those things point us to Christ. In the face of death, in the experience of loneliness and loss we sometimes begin to think of eternal things. Jonah ^{certainly} did.

Throughout the ages the saints have continued to thank God even when swallowed up by grief, misery, and death. Some scholars believe this Psalm, found in the second chapter of Jonah, echoes the faith of the Jews when their nation had been swallowed up by the Babylonian Empire some 500 years before the birth of Christ. Their beautiful temple had been destroyed. They'd been carried far away as aliens in a strange land. But there in the belly of Babylon the Jewish faith was renewed. They came to realise that God could hear them and answer them even in a pagan land. His love and power were not restricted to Jerusalem and the temple.

It's been that way
~~And so it has been~~ in every age. God hears and answers when we're in the depths. In a time of death dealing draught, the prophet Habakkuk wrote, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Look at Daniel in the lion's den or Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego in the fiery furnace! Look at Joseph in Egypt! Look at Paul and Barnabas in prison singing songs in the night! St. John, though imprisoned on the island of Patmos, saw Christ as King and praised God, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Scholars who study the paintings on the walls of the catacombs in Rome say that one of the favorite subjects of the early Christian artists was the story of Jonah and the whale. Few biblical stories have so captured the imagination of Christians. When the early Christians were swallowed up by persecution and death their thoughts turned instinctively to the God who delivered Jonah from the belly of the whale and raised up

Jesus from the dead. Sustained by the sign of Jonah they were able to thank God, in the midst of persecution and death, for the deliverance they knew would come, either in life or death. And countless, nameless, common ordinary men and women today continue to thank God from prison cells, on beds of illness, in nursing homes, and swallowed up by grief and disappointment.

Many of the hymns of thanksgiving we sing have been forged in the ~~heat of dramatic and moving experiences.~~ ^{furnace of suffering a tragedy,} Martin Rinkart's hymn, "Now thank we all our God" is one of them. Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor in the city of Eilenberg Germany during the Thirty Year's War from 1618 to 1648. Because Eilenberg was a walled city it became a severely overcrowded refuge for political and military fugitives from all over Germany. As a result, the overcrowded city suffered from famine and disease. In 1637, a great plague swept through the area resulting in the death of some eight thousand persons including Rinkart's wife. At that time, he was the only minister in Eilenberg. Rinkart, alone, conducted burial services for four thousand, four-hundred and eighty (4,480) people, sometimes as many as 40 or 50 a day! During the closing years of the war Eilenberg was overrun three times by different armies. The city lay in ruins, poverty and misery. It was out of this experience that Martin Rinkart wrote,

Now thank we all our God
 With heart and hands and voices,
 Who wondrous things hath done,
 In whom His world rejoices;
 Who, from our mother's arms,
 Hath blessed us on our way
 With countless gifts of love,
 And still is ours today.

Isn't it incredible that a man who had experienced so much needless

and stupid suffering could write those words? There is only one hint of trouble in Rinkart's hymn. In the second stanza he asks that God will "guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills."

Yes, there are many perplexing experiences in this life. Some of you may be perplexed this morning. You may feel empty. We all may experience deep grief and loss. Christians experience the dark and restless night of the soul of doubt. Jonah felt despair and the absence of God in the belly of the fish. He felt cast out by God. Jesus felt all this on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?" And we Christians can feel cut off at times from the presence and power of God. We can feel so helpless standing in the nursing home or at the bed-side of a loved one, knowing that there's no reasonable hope of recovery.

I certainly do not have the answer to the problem of innocent suffering. I have no satisfying answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people, at least no answer that will take away the hurt of the bereaved. I am not one to blithely say, "Praise the Lord" in the midst of tragedy. Yet in ^{the death & resurrection of} Jesus of Nazareth I find the basis of gratitude even in the depth of despair. Let us not run away from him like Jonah. Let us rather go to him in prayer, in worship, in sacrament, in Scripture, in faith and in trust and we'll learn from him the secret of gratitude and he will fill our hearts with thanksgiving, not *for* the bad things that happen to us, but *in* them.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.