

Prayer  
“The Piece of Blue Sky Beyond My Window...”  
Jonah 2

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The Reverend Fitz Neal

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**With Jonah in The School of Prayer**

**Reflection**

One of the side-benefits of the regular practice of prayer is that it builds reflection into our lives. It seems the reflective life is harder and harder to find. There are just so many more distractions than ever before.

One of the reasons for this is the internet and texting. So much of the inability to reflect and sit with God in prayer comes from the way our brains are being re-wired by these modern technologies. Studies have shown that both texting and the internet cause our brains to have shorter and shorter attention spans. Because the internet teaches people to go through or past story after story after story in rapid succession, our brains get to a point where we can't be still, can't concentrate for very long, can't reflect. Because texting and tweeting are limited to brief messages, our brains are being re-wired to handle smaller and smaller amounts of information.

Therefore – the future of prayer will mean re-training our brains to be able to sit and reflect – to think and focus more carefully. It will require focus and effort.

Listen to this from an ancestor in the faith, Bernard of Clairvaux, “*First of all, reflection purifies the very fountain, that is the mind, from which it springs. Then it governs the affections, directs our actions, corrects excesses, softens the manners, adorns and regulates the life, and lastly bestows the knowledge of things human and divine alike. It is reflection that brings order out of disorder, puts in the links, pulls things together, investigates mysteries, traces the truth, weighs probabilities, exposes shams and counterfeits. It is reflection which arranges*

*beforehand what is to be done, and ponders what is accomplished, so that nothing faulty, or needing correction may settle in the mind.*<sup>1</sup>

Creating space in your life for prayer will create space for reflection – reflection from God’s perspective, according to God’s will and heartbeat. It’s one of the great needs in the world today.

This is why I am giving prayer exercises – or assignments. It’s not enough to go away from worship with a feeling that we want to pray differently, or more. We need something to do so we can learn how to be with God in prayer. So I do encourage you to take the exercises and try them. Through prayer our relationship with God is deepened, but also, our view of life is changed. We reflect rightly and well.

### **Jonah & The Belly of the Beast**

Which leads us to Jonah. Jonah was an unreflective prophet! God gave him a clear assignment that he didn’t want – go to an enemy city (Nineveh, the capital of the dreaded and hated Assyrians – the destroyers of Israel!) and proclaim God’s favor upon the people there.

Because Jonah was more interested in his own comfort and desires – represented by Tarshish, (Tarshish was the idealized place of adventure in those days... like going to Disneyland), Jonah wasn’t able to see or reflect on what the Lord was saying to him. So he unreflectively got on a ship for the adventure – instead of the assignment from the Lord.

God got Jonah’s attention, wouldn’t you say? He was thrown overboard at his own request, and swallowed by a great fish. There, in the belly of the beast, he finally reflected.

The belly of the beast was a dark, confined place – probably pretty smelly, with little hope. Jonah was alive, but that was about it. What did he do for three days? He thought – he reflected. He prayed.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, from On Consideration, I, 7, as quoted in **Living Selections from the Great Devotional Classics**, *Selections from the Writings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, The Upper Room, 1961, p7.

Ever been in the belly of the beast? In a place in life where you are confined by circumstances? Can't maneuver? Where maybe your hope gets pretty slim? It's hard for some to pray in those places. Has been for me... But I've found that when I'm in a place like the belly of the beast, I do pray.

But not usually in the same way that Jonah prays... I tend to lament in those times. But Jonah doesn't lament, he prays a prayer of *thanksgiving!* What's more, Jonah's prayer is from the psalms. Every word of his prayer comes from nine different psalms. He uses no words of his own, but uses the words he has heard his whole life in worship, words of prayer prayed by God's people, Israel for hundreds of years before him – words he himself used over and over again until they were etched into his soul so deeply that, when his life was at its lowest point, those words enable him to give thanks to God in prayer.

### **The Psalms**

The book of psalms is a prayer-book. It's been used by Jews and Christians for eons to learn how to pray. Especially in those times – and they are many – when words fail us, the Psalms supply prayer-words for us that help us express our hearts to God. They have two kinds of prayer, basically – psalms of lament – and psalms of praise, or gratitude.

The point here is that prayer should encompass every aspect of our lives, the good and the bad, the exhilarating, and the demoralizing. It's all worthy of bringing before the Lord.

### **Thanksgiving**

But prayer should especially express thanksgiving. There are four basic kinds of prayer and they should all be practiced daily. I haven't named them before, because I've wanted us to learn them and THEN reflect on them. Today I want to name them for you:

- Adoration – praise
- Confession – agreeing with God about our sins
- Thanksgiving
- Supplication

You can remember these by the acronym ACTS. And I do suggest that you try using this, in order for a while... adore, then confess, then give thanks, THEN ask for others, the world, then yourself.

The two that people tend to skip are adoration and thanksgiving. That's why I gave a tough assignment on adoration. We're lacking in the ability to do it! The more we do it, the more we will be able to praise God as we desire to do!

It's also why we look this week at Jonah – who teaches us to give thanks in all things. Especially when we're in the belly of the beast.

Paul repeated that encouragement in I Thessalonians 5:18 “*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*” Note what this doesn't say. It doesn't say BE thankful for all things. No one can do that. What Paul says here is to GIVE thanks IN THE MIDST of all things. That's more reasonable.

No matter what, find something to give thanks to God for. True story – a pastor was working with a couple who were struggling. The wife was *really* struggling. They were stuck. So the pastor tried a long shot. He gave the wife a prayer assignment. “Go home. List ten things you are grateful for in your husband, and pray prayers of gratitude for those ten things every day for a week...” She couldn't think of ten things, she replied. Try harder, the pastor told her. Eventually, she had a list of ten things – took her a while. A week later, they were at church, holding hands. When the pastor asked her how they were doing she said, quietly, “Much better – when I listed the first ten things I was grateful for and began to pray, the Lord brought more and more things to my mind. I'm married to a wonderful man...”

They had more work to do, but this does show the power of prayers of gratitude in every circumstance.

What is it about prayers of thanksgiving that are so important? I believe there are three:

- 1. Giving thanks shows us our limitations and thus builds our trust in the Lord.**

- a. When I list, really list all that God has given me I get in touch with how little of it I have done or accomplished. I see what God has done that maybe I had missed. The more I do that, the more I see where God is at work in the present; my trust is restored, and my hope grows.
  - b. This is MOST IMPORTANT when things are going *well*. Those are the times when I find I must practice the discipline of giving thanks, because that's when I'm tempted to believe I did it!
  - c. Giving thanks when things are grand – when life is flush with blessings get's us in touch with our need to trust God for all things.
- 2. Giving Thanks teaches us how to reflect** – how to contemplate life and God.
- a. “Count your blessings name them one by one, count your blessings see what God has done. Count your blessings, name then one by one, count your many blessings see what God has done...”
  - b. It sounds so simple doesn't it? And it is! But it is filled with spiritual power for all that simplicity.
  - c. When we count them and bring them to God regularly, it puts us in a place of deeper reflection on all of life from God's perspective.
- 3. Giving thanks puts us in touch with Hope when life is challenging.**
- a. As you would think – I believe this point speaks for itself. When things are bleak, and we give thanks it helps us find hope – that there will be a future – God is real, even if silent, God WILL work everything out despite sin and the utter brokenness of the world, there is hope in God.

### **Etty**

I currently know of no more stirring example of this than that of Etty Hillesum, a Jewish girl who kept a journal during her stay at Auschwitz. Listen to what she wrote: *“Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised towards Your heaven, tears sometimes run*

*down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. And I want to be there right in the thick of what people call horror and still be able to say: life is beautiful. Yes, I lie here in a corner, parched and dizzy and feverish and unable to do a thing. Yet I am also with the jasmine and the piece of sky beyond my window.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Prayer Assignment**

So here is your prayer exercise for the week: Make a list of ten things you are grateful for. Memorize it. Offer it as a prayer every night right before you crawl into bed.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, pp. 51.