

A picture in my head from Sunday School days. I graduated from Sunday School a while ago. My memory may be somewhat distorted. The picture is of a picture. Of Jonah inside the belly of a whale. Lounging comfortably against the whale's ribs. Water lapping gently around his feet while he chats with God. A sanitised version for young boys and girls. The unsanitised version captured in today's reading. Jonah arrives in his resting place. Nearly dead from drowning. Wrapped in seaweed. One can only imagine the condition of his waterlogged body. Jonah physically and emotionally wrung out when God rescues him. Likening his experience to being in a watery grave. *'The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.'*

v5-6 Chapter 1 reveals how Jonah ends up in the sea. Tossed overboard, at his suggestion, by terrified pagan sailors. As he plunges into the depths of the raging sea Jonah cries out to the saving God, *'From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.'* **v2** Inside the belly of the big fish, Jonah prays again. A prayer of thanksgiving for God's response and rescue. Spoken in the past tense. Looking back at that tumultuous watery experience and God's intervention. A prayer motivated by life and death crisis. My reading of the story so far points to Jonah's genuine but messy prayer life. Marked by inconsistency, self-reliance and crisis-driven prayer. No indication of prayer while buying his ticket to Tarshish. Sleep but no evident prayer during the violent storm. Pagan sailors cry out to false gods then the God of the universe. Prior to any sign of Jonah uttering a word in prayer to the God of the universe. Revealed to us, Jonah the runaway prophet with a messy prayer life. Brothers and sisters, how messy is your prayer life? What are the signs of messiness? As a fellow messy pray-er, I have an invitation for you. Membership with Jonah and me of MPA. Messy Pray-ers Anonymous. A benefit of membership. Learning from the recovery of fellow members. Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 preserved for us. Teaches and encourages us to rebuild our messy prayer lives. Three building blocks from Jonah's prayer. **First**, the character and ways of God as the motivation and foundation of prayer. Jonah moved to pray because of the God to whom he prays. The God who is: creator, owner, sustainer, sovereign ruler. Jonah describes the waves as *'all your waves and breakers'*. Jonah recognises the hand of God in his experience. Judging, disciplining, refining, saving. Jonah says, *'You hurled me into the*

depths, into the very heart of the seas,' *'Salvation comes from the LORD.'* Sisters and brothers, our prayer life may be messy. Take heart. Jonah's God is our God. Through Jesus Christ we have a fuller revelation of our God. Our messy prayer invested with meaning and power as we pray to the God who is steadfast in love and faithfulness. To the God who answers messy pray-ers. Never lose sight of the one to whom we pray. Fixing our eyes on the one true God brings order in messy prayer lives. **Second**, the privilege of prayer. Given by God to his children. Even wayward children Jonah's prayer life messy but he prays. Because he belongs to God. In contrast to the one who clings to worthless idols. Jonah declares his commitment to respond to God as a believer ought. **v9**. He knows God personally. So he speaks with God personally. *'From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.'* **v1** *'But you, LORD my God...'* **v6** As a believer Jonah has access to the throne of grace. *"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. v7* He has assurance of being with God in the face of impending death. *I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'* **v4** Brothers and sisters, messy prayer lives do not rob us of the privilege of praying. God does not cut his wayward children off from access to his throne of grace. As believers this side of the Cross we have greater confidence than Jonah. That our messy prayers are presented before the throne of grace. In precisely the way they need to be. **Hebrews 10:19-22** *'Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.'* What a wonderful encouragement in our messy prayer life. *'What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!'* Our gracious God responds to the heart cry of the believer for rescue. Even when that cry comes from a renegade believer with a messy prayer life. Cry out to the Lord whatever the need. Whatever your rescue looks like. Whatever the current health of your prayer life. **Third**, praying the Bible. Jonah may be a messy, inconsistent pray-er. But, his prayers flow from a mind and heart full of Scripture. Remarkable the number of quotes or allusions to the Psalms in Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving. Two examples to illustrate. Listen to the echo of these verses in Jonah's prayer. **Psalms**

18:6, *'In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.'* **Psalm 42:7**, *'Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.'* Such prayer delights and honours God. God answers such prayers for they reflect his will and character. This is what Jesus means when he says, *'And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.'* **John 14:13-14** Sisters and brothers, I urge you to grow in praying the Bible. By that I mean using the prayers in the Bible and the truths of the Bible as our prayers for ourselves and others. A recipe for fruitfulness in prayer and ordering of a messy prayer life. We may lament we have trouble memorising Scripture. But we can start praying the Bible today. Open your Bible to the prayers throughout. Look for teaching in your daily Bible reading you can shape into prayer. Brothers and sisters as I conclude, let's open up the lens of our focus on Jonah's prayer life. Let's see the bigger picture. Of servants of God called to prepare the world for eternity as ambassadors for Christ. We are ambassadors of Christ for these times. Prayer vital in growing our readiness, showing our dependency on God, bearing fruit for him. Our messy prayer lives can discourage us to persevere in prayer. Remember messy prayer is superior to no prayer. Remember God delights in us honouring him in prayer. So, learn from Jonah's example. Take hold of the building blocks revealed to us in today's passage. Practically work towards order out of messiness. Pattern out of inconsistency. Breadth out of narrowness. Maturity out of infancy. As that great hymn reminds us, *We should never be discouraged—Take it to the Lord in prayer. Blessed Savior, Thou hast promised Thou wilt all our burdens bear; May we ever, Lord, be bringing All to Thee in earnest prayer.*