



*Prayer Letter*

June 2020



## **PRAYERS FROM THE DEEP** **(Jonah 2)**

Half of 2020 is now past. Not since the end of WWII has humankind experienced such a humiliating time as this novel corona virus epidemic. From the time it exploded in Wuhan and swept hurricane-like throughout China, the virus went on to swamp the rest of the defenseless world – more than 180 countries in total. In economically developed Western areas the virus violently rocked their long-established lifestyles. Economies were brought to a standstill and stock markets collapsed. Home isolation, virus

testing and even divorce rates have risen because of this pandemic. Besides the daily reports of confirmed cases and deaths, “social distancing” will become an inescapable requirement continuing to affect our daily lives.

Obviously this new requirement will affect Christians, accustomed to regular participation in church activities, more than other people. Due to the pandemic, traditional church services and meetings cannot be continued. One after

another, Christians in countries and areas where they can have switched to online worship. The sudden onset of the pandemic has left people feeling helpless and confused. And while everyone longs for a return to normal life, how can Christians see hope in their Faith to get through this pandemic and gain the wisdom to face it? A Christian worker in China, troubled by the virus, said, “People need to see an irrefutable miracle in the midst of this pandemic.”

Many miracles are recorded in Scripture. Yet when Israel’s scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you,” Jesus who had performed many miracles before the multitudes didn’t allow these Jews to witness one. Instead He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” (Mt 12:38-42).

We are about two thousand years away from the time of Jesus. From the perspective of technology and societal development, we have arrived at an era of Internet and globalization unimaginable in previous generations. However, no matter the scientific and technological advances, the improvements in social structures, and strides in material comfort – none of these have freed humankind from what Jesus called

“evil and adulterous” characteristics. Rather, the problem Jesus was describing of a Jewish society under the grip of Rome, now with globalization has become something the whole world has fallen into. Thus the reality of this “evil and adulterous generation” urges us to return to Jesus’s teaching to understand the meaning of “the sign of Jonah” for our times.

We observe these points from Jesus’s description in Matthew: the significance of “the sign of Jonah” was Jonah’s personal experience “in the belly of the fish” (v. 40). Also, the most important meaning for that time was the repentance of the Ninevites (v. 41); and for our times it is that the men of Nineveh will rise up to testify against this generation (v.41).

Jonah’s time and our generation are widely separated in history. The Bible tells us that Jonah was an Israelite prophet during Jeroboam’s reign (793-753 BC; II Ki 14:23-29). That time corresponds roughly to the period in Chinese history of “King Ping moving eastwards” (approx. 771 BC) when the Western Zhou Dynasty moved its capital eastwards from present-day Xi’an to Luoyang. Assyria was then the world’s mightiest imperial power with its capital in Nineveh. From the Book of Jonah, we see that Jonah was a very strong personality (Ch 1); he was well acquainted with the Lord and

# Prayer Points

## June 2020

**1** Today is International Children's Day. Started by churches in Chengdu, many churches spend this day reflecting on the social impact caused by the one-child policy enforced in China. Feticide and abortion have become very common due to the national policy. Although China has been implementing the "two-child" policy for some years, nevertheless the abortion rate still remains high.

**2** Christian education has been under suppression since 2018, and a large number of Christian schools have been closed since the second half of 2019. Christian home-schooling is also banned. This year, the Covid-19 has made the situation even worse, and many Christian students and kindergarteners are not able to attend school. Please pray for them.

**3** Please remember 2020's high school graduates who had planned to attend universities overseas. Their plans for further study have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors. Pray that God will make a way for these students.

**4** Please pray for a Christian drug rehab center in South China.

They have had difficulties in recent years due to external changes. Staff from overseas are still providing training and helping the local colleagues so that they can continue their work. We give thanks to God for the commitment and faithfulness of both outside and local colleagues.

**5** Many primary and secondary schools have reopened since May. To ensure social distancing, many schools have installed additional equipment, at the parents' expense. We thank God that the schools want to ensure student safety, but some unscrupulous suppliers may also grab this chance to hike prices. Pray that the Lord will prevent them from doing so.

**6** While the corona-virus is spreading globally, many factories along the coast have had to suspend production for lack of overseas orders. Some have even gone bankrupt. As a result, many migrant workers have lost their jobs. Please pray for this vast population of migrant workers, that they may find new jobs soon, or be able to return to their home areas and take up farming again.

**7** Please pray for the Jiao family. In the past few years, they have been serving at a church and selling takeaway meals to students to make a living. Over the past months Covid-19 has stopped their

business, so they are forced to relocate in order to provide for their livelihood. Pray that God will provide for this family, and also for the church which will lose their leading workers.

**8** Please pray for migrant workers who are returning to their rural hometowns. Pray particularly for their children who have been attending urban schools. Their unemployed parents are no longer able to afford to live in the expensive cities and pay school fees there, but it is also a very difficult decision to ask their children to give up the relatively high quality education in the city.

**9** It has become a trend for many young migrant workers to return to their hometown to open online businesses. These startups require a considerable amount of investment. A young man named Wang lost all his self-confidence and was on the verge of abandoning his faith because his parents, full-time ministers in the countryside, could not give him the financial help he sought from them. May the Lord have mercy on the many young people who are in similar situations.

**10** Please pray for sister Wang. Her husband died some years ago. A few years later, her only son died after overdosing on drugs, leaving behind a young daughter. Sister Wang has been taking care of her granddaughter all by herself.

Pray for sufficient physical and spiritual strength for Sister Wang to raise her granddaughter and continue serving at her church.

**11** The full time workers in urban migrant workers' churches need our prayers. They have been hit hard by the pandemic. Their congregations have shrunk because many migrant workers have been forced to return to the countryside. Many ministers in China, especially those with a migrant worker background, are facing serious challenges to their ministry and daily lives.

**12** Please pray for a Pastor Li in urban north China. Both he and his wife have been sick and they cannot afford medical expenses in the city hospital. Pray that God will heal them and enable them to continue their ministry.

**13** In most areas of China the pandemic has abated, and some house churches have resumed physical meetings on a small scale. But they are once again facing pressure from the authorities. Some worship meetings have been harassed and pastors arrested. Please pray that the church will continue to grow.

**14** Although China is still dealing with Covid-19, more measures are being taken to control religious activities. Government-appointed ministers are being asked to conform to official political

doctrines, which includes making public vows. We do believe that God is still in control – let us pray that Chinese Christianity will continue to develop well, in spite of such a political backdrop.

**15** Many urban churches learned to use online tools during the pandemic. Although the pandemic is abating, some churches intend to continue using online tools. This will be in direct conflict with the “Measures of the Management of Online Religious Information”. May God help churches to use online tools wisely.

**16** A Chinese believer, when visiting her relatives in the US, purchased some copies of the Bible and posted them to her family members in China. She was charged with “inciting subversion of state power” by the Chinese government. This woman was very shocked by this accusation. Please pray for her and other believers who are facing similar hardships.

**17** Please continue to pray for pastors who are still under house arrest. Thank God they and their families have been kept safe during the Covid-19 outbreak. Pray that these pastors will stand firm in their faith despite difficulties caused by the hot summer weather.

**18** Some pastors have complained that they have been unable to communicate with their Christian friends overseas.

Communication with other believers within China is also frequently disrupted. This has made them very anxious and frustrated. Pray that they will experience the grace of God in the midst of these difficulties.

**19** Please pray for urban church workers who have been forced to return to their rural homes, where they have been under house arrest. Pray that God will grant them physical and spiritual strength. Pray also for their children who have needed to live in places with which they are unfamiliar.

**20** Many are suffering emotionally due to the Covid-19 outbreak. There is great need for Christian counselors. Pray for more professionally trained Christian counselors who can provide godly and skilled counseling services.

**21** The weather is hot in June, and many big cities have serious air pollution. Pray for believers’ health – some churches meet in premises without air-conditioning.

**22** Please continue to pray for the residents in Wuhan. The city is no longer in lockdown, but Wuhan residents still face rejection and unfriendly treatment when they travel to other places. Pray that such post-Covid-19 problems will soon disappear.

**23** Please pray for churches in Wuhan, particularly the migrant worker churches and those whose members died during the Covid-19 outbreak. Pray that the churches will grow stronger in spirit and be a blessing to many more local residents.

**24** Please pray for believers and church workers serving in Wuhan and nearby places. During the outbreak, they have spent most of their time visiting and comforting patients and their relatives. Now they need to shift their focus to discipleship training. Pray that the Holy Spirit will draw more people to Jesus.

**25** Numerous small businesses in Wuhan and the coastal regions have become bankrupt. Many middle-class families are also having a hard time due to high unemployment rate. Please pray for people who have lost their jobs because of Covid-19, that they will have an opportunity to hear the gospel.

**26** Some unemployed workers (including believers) have decided to spend the summer in their rural hometowns. Pray that believers among them will be able to sow seeds of the gospel and have good opportunities to share the gospel with their relatives and neighbors.

**27** After the lockdown was lifted in Wuhan, all residents

had to have a “health status QR code”. All their activities can be constantly monitored. Many people are concerned about such monitoring measures. Pray that the authorities will use modern technology ethically and responsibly.

**28** Many churches organize youth camps and retreats during the summer. This year many such activities have had to be cancelled due to fear of Covid-19, as well as there being more restrictions from the authorities. May God bless all the evangelistic outreach to young people and married couples this summer.

**29** There were big variations in terms of how Covid-19 affected different regions of China. Heilongjiang province had the most imported cases. Please pray for doctors and nurses who are still working on the frontlines, and particularly for Christian medical workers. Pray that they will have sufficient strength and be good witnesses in their workplaces.

**30** There is only one week left before the National College Entrance Exams begin. In the past, throngs of high school graduates would be rushing into temples on this day to pray to idols. Some approach fortune tellers, looking for good luck. Pray that the Lord will help these students find Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

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especially understood His nature (Ch 4). Jonah was also an extremely capable man (Ch 3) and one who knew how to pray (Ch 2).

Delving into Jonah's experience in ministry and prayer we see that "in the fish's belly" meant that Jonah underwent extreme social isolation. In his own words, "deep in the realm of the dead" (Jonah 2:2), he could neither live nor die, driven from God's sight (2:4), driven to absolute despair, "the earth beneath barred me in forever" (v. 6).

Amidst today's pandemic, people feel miserable and helpless. Yet 2,700 years ago, Jonah, despite falling into the most extreme isolation didn't react with confusion as we do today. He didn't weep and wail and repent before God. Instead, from the belly of the fish he prayed, yet will I look toward the Lord (v.4), and only the Lord can save me (v.6), and my prayer will come before the Lord (v. 7). Jonah knew that the Lord would listen to his cry (v.2), so "with shouts of grateful praise, [I] will sacrifice to you. [and] What I have vowed I will make good." (v.9).

Looking at today's problems based on Jonah's experience, there are two things we need to note:

First, many people analyze and reflect upon this sudden, global epidemic from the standpoint of

suffering. But following Jesus's direction, we will discover that Jonah wasn't a complainer always moaning. He didn't consider his isolation to be suffering. He was thinking instead how to keep his vows to God (v. 9), how to return and worship God again at His temple in Jerusalem. He still firmly believed that Jehovah provided the only answer, the only salvation (v. 6). Looking back on the previous half year, many people describe their experiences as varying degrees of suffering. These are subjective responses to changes in their own lives and circumstances. Why didn't Jonah, who descended to "deep in the realm of the dead", have the same subjective reaction as we have?

We see comparatively that today's society encourages people to be more concerned about their own happiness and what they gain or lose. Over time, people want to see their quality of life steadily improve, else they will feel "bitter" about any decline in their lifestyle. Jonah's most outstanding quality was that his thoughts weren't fixed on himself, instead they were all directed toward God. Obviously he had a very different worldview than today's people. Imprisoned in the fish's belly, nevertheless Jonah wasn't all tangled up with thoughts of how to escape his plight. Instead, he was thinking of how to fulfil his vows to Jehovah. This kind of life attitude is lacking

among people of today. Jesus reminds us living in this “evil and adulterous generation” to re-examine our core values as Christians.

Secondly, as the epidemic in various places gradually stabilizes, questions of how people view China and how Christians pray for China will emerge again slowly. Most of us are innocent victims of this pandemic. Moreover, long before the epidemic burst forth, the Chinese church was already under attack from elements outside of itself. And with the added stress of the epidemic, what kinds of changes will these bring to the development of Chinese Christianity? How do we continue to pray for Chinese Christians?

In Jonah’s dispute with Jehovah God an important point sticks out – that God so loved the great city of Nineveh, “in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand

people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals”. (Jonah 4:11) Even though Jonah obviously did not have the ability to view his world and other nationalities as God did, nevertheless in our globalized world today, we must own a wider vision than Jonah’s. That is, we must see people’s helplessness and need from God’s viewpoint and feel with God’s heart for individuals.

In the world today, we see human behaviors full of contempt for God, self-righteousness, endless greed and lust and contradictions. Jesus has already taught us that if we use history as a mirror, then we can understand the “sign of Jonah” and experience the miracle of Nineveh. And when we can pray like Jonah, then may we, like him, be able to point the people of this age to the True Hope.

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