

Let us Pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

## **“Prophet Jonah’s Second Chance with God”**

Last week we left off with Jonah being in the worst place imaginable. Deep in the belly of the beast. Jonah has finally hit rock bottom and from that place of total despair, he forgets his silence and finally speaks. As Jonah lays on his back, deep in the pit of misery and despair, an odd miracle happens: Jonah chooses to give thanks. Jonah realizes the great truth of the gospel, the only message that really matters, the only thing we can cling to when we are in a pit of despair: Deliverance Belongs to the Lord. We pick up our story there. At the very end of chapter 2.

One of the great lessons of Jonah's failure and forgiveness is that God can continue to use those who return to Him. Thankfully, we serve the God of a second chance. Just like Jonah, many spiritual leaders received a second chance to do what God called him to do. Adam sinned in the garden and God covered him. Moses murdered a man and God called him. Elijah quit and complained then God re-commissioned him. Peter denied the Lord and then God used him at Pentecost. John Mark deserted the mission team at Pamphylia yet God moved upon him to write the second Gospel.

And that has been the story of the church through the ages. We have all received a multitude of opportunities to return and serve God. And once God corrected His reluctant prophet, He continued the work He intended. Jonah's third chapter reminds us that authentic revival impacts both the individual and the culture.

Okay. So... perhaps this is obvious, but sometimes the obvious needs to be stated: has Jonah's call changed? (No). Jonah ran from the Lord. He refused to even have a conversation with God about this. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with this call. Nope. No way. Other direction. Then, Jonah ends up in the pit of hell, God sends a giant fish into his life which causes Jonah to realize that deliverance comes from God alone. And then, God calls to Jonah, asking him to do the same thing he was supposed to do. Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, once described the Christian life as “a long obedience in the same direction.” Until now, Jonah's journey was a short disobedience in the wrong direction. But it was not too late for the runaway prophet to change course and do the right thing—run in God's direction! That meant going straight to Nineveh, which Jonah did. The plans of God cannot be prevented.

God is bigger. God is bigger than our plans. God is bigger than the stuff that gets in our way. Sometimes that stuff is storms or people. It's the injustice of the world. It's the natural disasters. It's evil. It's disease or broken systems. Sometimes that stuff that gets in the way is us. Our worry. Our anger. Our fear. We get in the way of us becoming who we are meant to be. And yet, the plans of God cannot be foiled.

Jonah went to preach with unquestioned obedience. But we must ask, "Why them? Why then?" The People of Nineveh were not praying for revival, nor were they interested. To a degree, Jonah has a point. The Assyrians qualified better as candidates for God's sovereign judgment than as candidates for God's sovereign grace. But Jonah's successful preaching campaign had nothing to do with Jonah's ability or the Assyrian's worthiness. All we know for sure is that God had a purpose beyond human understanding. If we take John 3:16 seriously, then we must conclude that before God showered Nineveh with grace, He reached to them with love.

Perhaps we can look at God's choice to save the Assyrians differently. Maybe this represented God's plan to produce better in the world by saving the worse people in the world. No doubt their plundering stopped for at least a short time. In the end, the revival at Nineveh is nothing short of sovereign work of forgiveness that produced change. God is bigger than even the very worst things that can happen in this life.

My blessed imagination runs wild, picturing a wild-eyed prophet entering Nineveh like a street preacher with an urgent message. Jonah is weary from the four-hundred-mile journey that he had to travel back toward the capital city. His flesh has bleach marks from the acid wash his body received while inside the belly of the great fish. He stinks like

Charlie the Tuna. If Jonah's smell and appearance did not turn the Ninevites away from him, surely his message would. He delivered eight words laced with fire-breathing judgment, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). God gave Nineveh only forty days to turn from their wicked ways. Surprisingly, the Bible says in the next verse, "And the people of Nineveh believed God" (3:5). The Ninevites wasted no time by sitting around and discussing the prophet's message; instead, they acted upon it immediately. They called a fast and wore sackcloth. Even the king took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then, the king issued a royal proclamation, urging all the people and beast to do the same and "call out mightily to God" (3:8). When God saw how the Ninevite's responded, He relented of the disaster.

God told Jonah go and "preach the message that I tell you." While spiritual renewal may occur without a preacher or prophet, it never occurs with divine truth. And here Jonah declared the Word of God. Interestingly, the prophet didn't sugar-coat the truth out of fear of offending the audience. He neither clamored for their favor, nor trembled from their threats. This scenario reminds the preacher of his duty as a messenger of God. We must speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15): While we might question Jonah's motives based on the last chapter of his book, declaring the message of God's pending judgment against lost humanity qualifies as an act of love.

We offer the truth to all people: Jonah declared the truth to the commoners in the street and leaders in the palace. God's offer of grace extends to all races in all places. This, of course, reminds of our commission to go into the entire world with the gospel. We obey the truth whole-heartedly: Jonah's message was not a dissertation on the possibility and probability that God could destroy the city of Nineveh. When we declare the truth, we do more than simply inform. Instead, we call for radical obedience to the truth of God. The Assyrians responded to the message with genuine repentance. To say it differently, they believed the Word of God and then behaved in a consistent manner with the truth. In fact, verse 3:10 indicates that when "God saw their actions" He forgave them and withheld His judgment.

While the Ninevites' response was cause for rejoicing, Jonah was not happy with the positive result of his ministry. In fact, 4:1 says, "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." Anger is an odd response, but Jonah's prayer reveals why he was so outraged, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Instead of rejoicing that the Ninevites turned from their wickedness to God, Jonah engaged in self-pity by pouting. He took more interest in a growing plant that provided shade for his head than the one hundred and twenty thousand people who needed God. The Lord mocked the prophet for pouting, and then God defended His right to pour His gracious pity upon the Ninevites (4:4-11). When God's people experience revival [i.e., Jonah], lost people that completely ignore God came to Him in repentance. To say it differently, God must do something to us before He does anything through us.

Notice two key terms here: "saving" and "undeserving." "God relented" or spared the Assyrians from destruction. Of course, this pictures God's grace because the people did not deserve His mercy. We should be careful to remember that no one deserves mercy. But, from a human perspective, if anyone lacked moral decency and deserved wrath, they did.

Notice the transformation of the prevailing culture. Only God could produce such a radical change in an entire city. Remember that when God regenerates the soul, outward manifestations of holiness should follow. The convert that feels comfortable in his former rebellion probably never truly repented in the first place.

It is easy for those in the church to cast stones from behind our mortar and brick walls at the sinners. But will that type of preaching or evangelism make a difference in our world? Probably not. The message of repentance, however, can change hearts. If we in the church hope to impact our world for good, we must declare the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ.

The book of Jonah is truly the greatest fish story ever told. From it, we learn that God's call is irrevocable, God's presence is inescapable, and God's grace is irresistible. God's grace is available to ALL people and God has called us (God's children) to be instruments of his grace. Amen.

