THE

Interrupted

LIFE

lessons from

JONAH
The Interrupted Life
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You know how it feels, right? You’ve got one free hour to do as you please and something happens causing that beloved 60 minutes to disappear like a forgotten dream. Frustrating. Or, you’ve mapped out a plan for your day and a traffic jam derails your whole schedule. Irritating, isn’t it?

What if it’s not just that all-important hour or even a particularly strategic day that’s interrupted; what if it’s your whole life? You planned one thing for this season, and yet your current situation looks nothing like what you had in mind. Someone or something tampered with your ambitions, goals, and dreams. The yellow-brick road of life veered off in some unexpected direction.

You’re not the only one who can relate. Jonah knows exactly how you feel. As a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jonah’s priorities included hearing from God and declaring God’s messages to His people. The prophet lived in a time of economic prosperity as Israel regained
lost territories, just as Jonah said they would, and achieved its most prosperous time since Solomon. While we know little of Jonah’s life prior to the events in the book, we do know Jonah had foretold good things for Israel that came to pass. As a result, the prophet was likely popular, highly respected, and appreciated. Life was good.

In Jonah 1:1, however, “The word of the LORD” came to the prophet—not in the form of good news for the inhabitants of Israel but as a warning and call to repentance for Gentiles, specifically the people of pagan Nineveh who had a reputation for brutality. Jonah had spent his life declaring good things for Israel, and now he was being sent to their enemies. This was not what he’d expected. For Jonah this call, this interruption, held little appeal.

Interrupted lives—probably an accurate descriptor for points in all of our journeys, don’t you think? We all chart out a tidy path of goals
for our lives. I certainly had. Without even realizing it, I’d taken my life by the helm and asked God to conform to my flimsy timetable and arrangements.

This was never clearer than when baby Jude, our third spectacular yet surprising gift from God, began growing in my tummy. We were shocked at the prospect of life with a newborn ... again. Yet through this new adventure, God began to expose my tendency to cling to my own plans instead of embracing His purposes for me, even when they differ from what I deem suited for my abilities.

Your interruptions may differ from mine. In fact, I suspect they do. Life’s far too individual and unexpected to treat us all the same. Maybe you face looming retirement with a diminishing nest egg in a crumbling economy. Perhaps you’re staring down another year of singleness when you long for marriage. Maybe your spouse’s revealed secret threatens your security or a new baby or two will soon arrive, requiring all the attention that little ones do. You might find yourself overwhelmed
by a burst of business success far beyond your capacity to manage or feel God redirecting you into ministry that means abandoning a lucrative corporate career. You may even struggle to overcome yet another heartbreaking year of battling infertility or coming to grips with a tragic loss. No matter how unique our situations, we’ve clearly been thrust into something we weren’t planning.

Without doubt interruptions can be difficult to manage, and we often interpret them—at least at first—as maddening annoyances. But no matter the specifics, interruptions might well open the door to a holy privilege.

When we signed up to follow Christ, we agreed to be open to divine intervention—God interruptions. While His “call” might not always be convenient or easy, responding to it should not just be a duty but our joy. God graciously gives divine interventions to His children, providing us with opportunities to partner in His purposes. He has kingdom purposes and plans, and He wants to include us in their unfolding.
Jonah didn’t see the call to go to Nineveh as a privilege; instead, he ran from it, tried to turn down the interruption, and in doing so attempted to rewrite God’s plan for his life. What did his efforts earn him? An unpleasant stay in a fish.

When, however, Jonah was given a miraculous second chance, he finally yielded to the Lord. When he did, Jonah’s ordinary existence became extraordinary. Not only did the prophet spark what some scholars call the greatest revival in human history but as a result of the mission he was mentioned in the New Testament by Jesus. The prophet’s story really began not in a storm or when he found himself spat out on the shore but when he yielded to God’s divine interruption and made an eternal imprint on humanity.

Maybe you’ve been running from God’s clear direction for your life. Maybe you initially refused to follow His plan or you’ve engaged but only begrudgingly. I encourage you to consider that maybe, just maybe, this interruption is a divinely sealed invitation to be a part of something
Interruptions

unfathomably spectacular. God wants to shape and use your life in amazing ways. Even if you’ve balked or complained or run away from Him in the past, know that He extends you a second chance to partner with Him.

God’s call on your life, what He’s asking you to surrender to right now in this season, means that He has chosen you above anyone else to do what He’s asking. You are the one He singled out as His partner for a particular project. Whether it’s parenting a special needs child, starting a Bible study, or even, like Jonah, reaching out to those who you’d rather avoid, He’s purposefully given you the high honor of being the one He deemed suited for a task with heavenly implications.

A supernatural outcome waits on the horizon for anyone who chooses to partner with God. So go ahead, sit on the edge of your seat in anticipation. Accept that interruption for the gift that it is.

God offers you a chance to write a story of eternal significance and it all begins ... with an interruption.
Forgiveness of past sins qualifies us for present service.
Many believe that one big mess-up in a Christian’s life forever disqualifies them from effectively serving God, but this misunderstanding ignores a beautiful reality: Forgiveness of past sins qualifies us for present service.

The most humbling times in my life are undoubtedly those when I am on a platform teaching God’s people. With Bible perched under my arm, notes tucked inside, heart palpitating in my chest, and eyes scanning the crowd, I ask the audience to bow for a quick prayer before the message begins. I’m praying not only because I need God’s empowerment but because I need a minute to gain my composure.

You see, I’m stunned. Every time I’m getting ready to open God’s Word and teach from it, I’m in complete disbelief. Why He didn’t relegate me to the proverbial shelf long ago, I’ll never know.
Like Jonah, in so many moments of rebellion, I’ve chosen a lifestyle out of sync with God’s will for me. Yet for some odd reason He still lets me partner with Him.

I handle this position with care. I’m too shocked to do otherwise.

Is there something God has allowed in your life, some type of beauty-for-ashes miracle He has allowed, the sight of which causes you to simply stand back, mouth agape in wonder, and stare? How can we not take time to relish the wonder of God’s mercy?

A constant tension plagues the human existence. It begins the moment we are born: Our flesh wants to go one way when God wants to lead us in another direction. It’s evident we see this as our sin nature battles against God’s standards, but we also find it in our tendency to make choices that conflict with His plans. Throughout our lives our wills battle God’s will. Our ambitions try to squeeze out His ambitions for us. Our goals for ourselves fall short of His goals for us. While it’s
tempting to think that living for God might prove impossible, every major spiritual player in the Bible dealt with this tension between our will and God’s and most—though often after a failure or two—eventually got it right.

In Jonah 3:1-2 the prophet found himself washed up on a beach where he received a fresh opportunity to follow God’s direction: “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh.’ ” Hear that again: “The word of the LORD came ... the second time.” What follows is a stunning and fantastic reminder of the mercy and grace available to all those who have messed up and need to know that they aren’t all washed up: Jonah’s relationship with God was restored, and as a result of his ministry, Nineveh underwent drastic revival.

Most biblical people who made a lasting mark in Christianity had a point where they stood at a crossroad. They had to decide to yield to divine intervention at the cost of their own plans or continue their own path instead. From Noah’s call
to build an unfamiliar object called an ark to Peter’s being told to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius, any person God used mightily for His glory both began and continued his or her journey with divine interruptions. As they yielded to God’s purposes, they unknowingly wrote life stories that made a mark on history. Many of these individuals, however, first tried to control their own destinies before wisely and fully submitting to God’s plans. I call their stories second-chance miracles.

First, consider Aaron’s life. Aaron is known mostly as Moses’ brother. He played second fiddle to Moses, serving as his mouthpiece when he went to stand before Pharaoh. In the wilderness, when the Israelites waged war against the Amalekites, Aaron wasn’t in the trenches of battle making a name for himself but standing beside his brother, holding up his hands in prayer (Ex. 17:12). Aaron seemed to have a hard time coming out from underneath the shadow of his older sibling. Yet he had a high calling on his life by God as well.