

How to Respond When God Gives you a Second Chance Jonah 2

INTRODUCTION

As we come this morning to Jonah 2, we are given a deeper look into the heart of Jonah. Chapter 2 puts a pause on the historical narrative of Jonah and brings us before the spiritual nature of Jonah. This section of the story seems to represent a turning point as Jonah prays to God from within the belly of the whale. I say a turning point because after Jonah concludes his prayer, the giant fish, as directed by the Lord, spits him out on dry land so he can fulfill his missionary message to the city of Nineveh.

What we witness in chapter 2 is clearly a divine second chance for Jonah. If you recall what we learned in chapter 1, this prophet of the Lord was disobedient in each opportunity he was given. God told him to go to Nineveh with a message of repentance, and Jonah went the opposite direction, “away from the presence of the Lord.” Jonah went down from Jerusalem, down into a ship going to Tarshish, and finally down into the inner part of the ship to sleep during the storm at sea. His downward descent symbolizes his downward descent from God Himself.

Yet what we learn in chapter 1 and throughout the entire book is that Jonah is not the main character of the story: God is. Despite Jonah’s running away from God, God continued to run after Jonah. God appointed both the storm and the fish: His chosen instruments to get Jonah’s attention. The great irony of the book is that before God can get the attention of Ninevites, He first needs to get the attention of His own prophet. ***Jonah’s time in the belly of this fish was not divine judgment, but a divine second chance.***

We similarly need second chances from the Lord. When we fail to listen and obey the first time, God graciously grants us new opportunities to change our ways. And like Jonah’s experience in this whale, He does so in sometimes unconventional ways! When I was in college, God used a third shoulder dislocation to wake me up to the call He was placing on my life for

ministry. When I was in Springfield, MO, God used a difficult circumstance to persuade me away from worldly pursuits. And while Emma and I have been here in Tampa, God used a slower than expected closing process to convince us to back out of the purchase of a home in northern Land of Lakes. Romans 11:33 says, *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”*

The question for you this morning is not why are you given second chances but how will you respond to the second choices you are given? What we will see here is that second chances both reveal and require something. **Our main point is that second chances reveal God's grace so we can respond in new ways.**

These two—God's grace and our response—are connected in a necessary order of occurrence. When our response comes before God's grace, then it's likely motivated by the wrong reasons: It could be motivated by self-righteousness, a burdensome feeling that we've got to get back on the straight and narrow road, or a simple desire to appease God following a hard consequence. But when God's grace is put in its proper place, our obedient response flows from a heart of joy and thanksgiving.

Therefore, we will begin by looking not at Jonah, but at God and His grace here in chapter 2.

BODY

Let's begin with what second chances reveal: They reveal God's grace. After Jonah confessed his rebellion to his fellow sailors in chapter 1, they proceeded to hurl him into the open sea. Jonah, as any rational human would, assumed this was his final descent into the depths of the sea. He says in 2:3 that the floods surrounded him; God's waves and billows passed over him, and in 2:6, he went down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever. Jonah referred to this downward movement as his descent into Sheol itself. “Sheol” is a Hebrew word that refers to the place of the dead. In Amos 9:2, it's spoken of as located under the earth. Those

who went down to Sheol were seen as separated from God. This stands in agreement with what Jonah says in 2:4: *"I am driven away from your sight."*

It would only seem just that Jonah, in running away from the presence of the Lord should be driven away from the sight of the Lord...forever. This is what we all assume when we fail to respond to God's call. When we miss our opportunity, why should we ever think another opportunity should arise? Everything in our world trains us to think this way. Why would or should God be any different? ***Yet God's economy doesn't function like the world's economy. While He's a God of justice, He's also a God of abundant grace.***

And that grace is seen in three particular ways in Jonah 2. First we see **God's protection**. For Jonah, this is evidenced in his protective haven from the sea—the giant whale that God appointed to swallow him. This was by no means Jonah's final fate, but it was instead the beginning of Jonah's second chance.

This part of the story receives the most flack from those claiming to be scientifically-sophisticated or intellectual. Skeptics say that no whale could swallow a man in the first place, let alone provide a safe habitat for three days and three nights as the Bible claims. Christian liberals have attempted to avoid this problem by saying that the story of Jonah was only an allegory and was never meant to be understood as actual history.

Yet the book of Jonah was certainly written as though it were actual history. Jonah was a real prophet who was mentioned by name in 2 Kings 14:25. No ancient Jews or early Christians questioned the authenticity of the book and its story. Most importantly, the Lord Jesus Himself accepted the account as true. He said in Matthew 14:21 that the men of Nineveh will rise in judgment against His generation because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. Going further, Jesus confirmed in just the previous verse that Jonah was indeed in the whale for three days and three nights!

This was clearly a true story! Could it happen naturally then? Maybe: There's always some air in a whale's stomach. And as long as the animal a whale swallows is still alive, digestive enzymes do not usually begin secreting. What's a far more likely explanation is that this was a miracle. As Scripture states, this was "a great fish" prepared and sent by God.

As a result of this remarkable miracle, it likely contributed to Jonah's prophetic message to the Ninevites. We don't know if Jonah spoke any further words than, *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* But just like Jesus' resurrection proved His message, so Jonah's resurrection-like experience may have proved his message.

But the point here is that God's grace is evidenced in miraculous protection. And I will tell you, God continues today to do miraculous acts of protection for His people. It doesn't mean He promises physical protection! But yet God often shows us His protection when our lives are most fragile. He did this for the Israelites at the crossing of the Red Sea. He did this for Daniel in the lion's den. And He even does this when our lives have been wayward like Jonah.

There's a story of an old Indian right of passage into manhood that a boy needed to perform. The act involved going into the wilderness by himself with a blindfold over his eyes. His mission was to survive all night in the wild without the ability to see. But this one particular time, after already being out for half the night, the boy heard wolves nearby. In his fear he ran for his life, deciding to chuck the blindfold and run back home. But with his eyes now looking behind him, he found no wolf in sight. So he stopped running and noticed that instead he now saw his father with a bow and arrow with the dead wolf at his feet.

As he approached his father, he said, "Dad where did you come from?" His dad answered, "I've been here all night, right next to you, ready to pounce on any evil predators." The boy looked down in disappointment and said, "If I had known you were here, I wouldn't have run, but because I did, I failed

the test.” His dad looked at him with compassion and said, “Son, whether you succeed or fail, I’m here to be your protector.”

Church, this is God’s fatherly protection over us. There’s a famous quote: *“You’re safe not because of the absence of danger, but because of the presence of God.”* He is so near that He lives inside of you! He’s given you all the spiritual armor and resources you need to stand against the enemy. ***His presence is your deliverance! His presence is your protection.*** And even when you run away in fear like Jonah, because you are his child, His heart is to protect you and draw you back to Himself.

This is God’s grace in protection. **We also see God's grace in second chances through God's communion.** For Jonah, this was his private sanctuary with the Lord in the belly of the whale. ***Far from this being a place of separation from God, this was to be a place of connection with God.*** It was here in the most unlikely of places that God was able to get Jonah’s attention and remind him of his mission.

As Jonah vulnerably was swallowed up by the whale, fully accepting and only awaiting his imminent death, he realized that he was still alive. In the panic of the moment, his prayer went from a tone of desperation to discovery.

You see, in our moments of failure, the crucible that was meant for our discipline is often the same place that we discover God in fresh ways. If you’re like me, in order to hear from God you first need to get knocked off your high horse. It’s usually in the dirt of our own disgrace that we finally raise our eyes to look upon Jesus. It’s here that we finally come to terms with our pride and invite the peace and power of God to fill us again.

Perhaps for the first time in his life, Jonah truly called upon his Lord from the heart and he was certain that God heard him. Why does God feel so close in our pain? The answer is that pain fixes our perception. ***Pain takes***

the focus off ourselves and puts it on God alone. We realize we are nothing and He is everything.

Every great turning point needs a place for this perception change.

For the Apostle Paul, he literally got knocked off his high horse and was blinded for an extended time. For the prideful King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, he was driven away from his kingdom in humiliation due to a God-given mental illness. It wasn't until he looked to heaven and acknowledged the Most High as the only God who rules all kingdoms of the earth that his reason returned to him.

Maybe God has designed a temporary holding place for you - a season of life that feels like discipline. ***His voice to you, as it was for Jonah, is not to see the crucible as condemnation but rather an opportunity for divine communion.*** Let God meet you in your pain that He might give you His peace. Let God meet you in your loss that He might give you His love. ***This gauntlet of trouble is actually His grace in disguise.***

And, like Jonah, your life is not meant to end with a hard lesson learned, but instead to experience **the third revelation of God's grace: God's resurrection**. For Jonah, this was his personal transport to the coast. After Jonah meets the Lord in the belly of the whale, the story ends with God speaking to the fish and having it vomit him out upon the dry land. Charles Spurgeon once said, ***"We are immortal until our work is done."*** Obviously for Jonah, being spewed back onto land was his clear sign that God had more work for him to do—namely to take God's message to the Ninevites.

But Jonah's second chance was meant to produce more than a restored mission; ***it was meant much more to produce a restored heart.*** As we've already said, God meets us in our need so that we learn He's all that we need. He comes to change our hearts, not just the work of our hands. If we're wise we know that the only way He can change the work of our hands is to first change our heart.

The only way to change hard hearts like ours is to perform a resurrection. Ephesians 2 states that apart from Christ, we are dead in our sins. We

have no affection for Christ and no willingness to fulfill His mission. Even after coming to the Lord, we sometimes have seasons of dulled senses, when our flesh is amplified and our changed heart is suppressed. What we need is a resurrection—whether it be to new life in Christ or renewed life in Christ.

Jonah's experience was very much a type of resurrection. He was brought to the brink of death only to suddenly be walking again on dry land. Jesus used his remarkable story in Matthew 12 to compare it to His own resurrection. V.40 says, *“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* Jonah's resurrection-like experience and the far greater resurrection of Jesus are meant to show something: ***Resurrection is possible! In other words, true change is possible!***

How often we doubt, especially later in life, that any real heart change could really happen. Yet Jesus' resurrection not only makes it possible; it empowers it. ***Jesus went down into humiliation and even death itself to make a way for lost sinners.*** Hebrews 10:19 says, *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience.”*

The great hope here is that like both Jonah and Jesus, our days are not destined to end in death; they are destined to end in resurrection! ***Our days of humiliation and discipline are designed to result in hearts of new devotion!*** As Christians we joyfully walk out of death-like experiences—pain, lost opportunities, disappointments, shame, broken relationships, our own waywardness and reckless living—so that we can then walk into new life in Christ. This is God's grace to you in your rebellion. Like Lazarus, hear His resurrection call and walk out of your grave.

As we said before, the main character in the book of Jonah is actually God. We just got to see an up close examination of God's mercy in Jonah's life. ***But Jonah still had a response to make.*** Sadly, the great unresolved question of the book is whether or not Jonah truly changed. He was given a great second chance, but second chances require a new response.

As we will see in our study of chapters 3 & 4 in the coming weeks, it doesn't appear that Jonah bore fruit in keeping with repentance. His message to the Ninevites was short and only focused on God's looming judgment, not God's willingness to forgive. His message had no grace. Secondly, he was angry and bitter that the Ninevites actually repented and God then relented of disaster. He says he was so angry that he was even willing to die. In other words, death would be better than the unrelenting anger He had towards God.

For these reasons, chapter 2 becomes a challenge to believe the legitimacy of Jonah's prayer to God. Jonah was a spiritual leader of his day, and Jesus did condemn such leaders, saying in Matthew 15:8, ***"These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."*** Jonah seems to know all the right things to say in his prayer, but perhaps they are merely pious platitudes. Why might we conclude this? It's amazing how often Jonah quotes the Psalms in his prayer. Notice at least seven specific references:

- ***"Your billows swept over me"*** [2:3] Compare with Psalm 42:7.
- ***"I am driven away from your sight"*** [2:4]. Compare with Psalm 31:22.
- ***"The waters closed in over me"*** [2:5]. Compare with Psalm 69:1.
- ***"my life was fainting away"*** [2:7]. Compare to Psalm 147:3.
- ***"To Your holy temple"*** [2:7]. Compare to Psalm 18:6.
- ***"to vain idols"*** [2:8]. Compare to Psalm 31:6
- ***"Salvation belongs to the Lord"*** [2:9]. Compare to Psalm 3:8.

For those of us who grew up in the church or have been Christians for many years, we too can know all the right things to say. Our prayers can be permeated with Scripture references and lofty accolades. ***The danger here***

is that, like the Pharisees, we can become convinced that God is hearing us for our many words. So why change our heart if our words alone seem to be working?

It's hard to say if this was true for Jonah. Perhaps the biggest clue that this masquerade may have been at play here is that Jonah offers no confession of sin in this prayer. It's essential in our coming to God that we admit our wrongdoing. We must acknowledge we are sinners in need of grace! ***Grace can't transform our hearts if we don't receive it for the specific sins we commit.***

The authenticity of Jonah's repentance will be a continual debate, yet there are still things for us to learn from his prayer. It at least shows us the right words that should comprise our response to second chances. That's your second main point: **Second chances require a new response.**

The first response can be summarized in the words, ***"I recognize your hand at work here."*** Jonah said in 2:3, ***"For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea...all your waves and billows passed over me."*** This situation was not a random natural occurrence but rather divine providence. Jonah specifically says "You cast me into the deep." He acknowledges God's activity behind the scenes. Furthermore, he makes the connection between his disobedience and God's discipline. In a time where his voice could have gone silent in denial, Jonah instead raises his voice to God in prayer. Jonah 2:2 says he called out to the Lord. His perception of God's involvement prompted His prayer.

A good test for us in challenging circumstances to know if we see God's hand in it is the degree to which we connect with God in prayer through it. If you fail to see God's involvement, you are either numb to His activity or bitter because of His activity. In such moments, it's important to remember Romans 8:28 - God is always working for the good of those whom He loves. He never works to ruin us, but to bless us. Yet because of our hard-heartedness, He sometimes has to get our attention in shocking ways. He's willing to stir up the circumstances of our lives in order to get to our

heart. The question is whether we will recognize it has His work...His good work.

Secondly, our response to second chances should be, “*I turn my eyes back to you.*” In Jonah 2:4 he says, *“I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.”* A good definition of backsliding is taking your eyes off of God. Likewise, a good definition of repentance is turning your eyes back to God. You always run in the direction your eyes are looking. There’s a reason the classic children’s song says, *“Be careful little eyes what you see...”* Our eyes are easily captivated by vain things that distract us away from our Godward direction.

Jesus described the issues of our heart as logs in our own eyes. It doesn’t diminish our ability to see the problems in others, but it does diminish our ability to see the problems in us. It shows our spiritual blindness. Jesus also said in Matthew 6:22, *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”* In other words, Jesus is saying if you think your body is full of Gospel light when really it’s full of darkness, then you are far more spiritually blind than you can even imagine!

Moments of transition, just like Jonah’s, that take away our comfort and burden our souls, should reveal our spiritual blindness. They should prod us to take our eyes off our vain idols and turn them back to the Lord. Hebrews 12:2 says, *“Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.”* When we do this, He takes the minimal faith we have and grows it. He makes us believe the Bible again and trust Him for what seems impossible. It’s how He changes our heart. It’s the response we must make.

Thirdly, our response to second chances should be, **“*I thank you for your compassion.*”** Jonah knew he deserved the circumstances he was facing. When he was thrown into the water and got swallowed by a giant fish, he did not expect to live; he was expecting to die and be judged. Yet Jonah 2:6 says, *“I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you*

brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.” Jonah experienced the mercy of his Lord first hand.

I'm not sure about you, but in my life mercy has been a big motivator. A prison inmate can never move forward until someone breaks his chains. A slave can never run free until someone graciously releases them. So you too will never move forward until you understand God's mercy.

How do you know if you understand mercy? Your heart is full of thanksgiving. In v.9 we see Jonah's humble attitude of thanksgiving. Keep in mind that he was thanking God for his revitalized life before the fish had vomited him on the coastline! This shows that before we experience the evidence of God's mercy, we can still thank Him for His mercy. Perhaps Jonah was more thankful for God's forgiveness of his heart than the betterment of his circumstances.

Lastly, our response to second chances should be, ***“I renew my commitment to you.”*** In Jonah 2:8, he says, *“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.”*

What's clear is that Jonah now plans to fulfill his missionary venture to Nineveh: What he has vowed he will now pay, or complete. But it's hard to know if God truly changed his heart. He plans to go to Nineveh, but he still doesn't expect them to repent. Nineveh was a city with many idols, and Jonah said those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. What's sadly ironic is that Jonah continued to pay regard to his idol of prideful nationalism: No one but the Jews should receive God's grace!

What God most wants is a commitment of the heart and not duty only. God doesn't need your ministry and he certainly doesn't need your effort for the kingdom. He doesn't want the sweat of your brow, but the sincerity of your heart...What He most wants is a sincere heart that forsakes vain idols.

CONCLUSION

As we close today, we will have an opportunity to partake of communion. Just like Jonah in the whale, this is a chance for us to pause and ponder the mercy of Jesus Christ. We have seen this morning that God's grace is greater than all our sin. It meets us in our rebellion and leads us forward to new resolutions.

COMMUNION

CLOSING PRAYER

BENEDICTION - 1 Peter 5:10 - *“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*