

# “JONAH: A God of Second Chances”

A sermon by  
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**TEXTS: Jonah 3:1-10 and Acts 9:1-9**

**Jonah 2:1-10**

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. ‘So, Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’*

*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.*

**Acts 9:10-22**

*Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So, Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands-on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

*For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.*

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Perhaps it is because I am a Pennsylvanian, or perhaps it is because I truly believe that rodents can predict the weather. Whatever the reason, one of LuAnn's and my favorite movies is *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. Bill Murray plays Phil Collins, a cynical and world-weary news weatherman. He and his crew go to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the annual Groundhog Day Festival. Locals gather at Gobbler's Knob. There, each year on February first, Punxsutawney Phil, a woodchuck, is removed from his temporary home. If he sees his shadow and ducks back inside, six more weeks of winter are certain. If not, spring is just around the corner.

It is a curious plot for a movie. Phil gets stuck in a time warp. He must relive each day. Each morning begins with the alarm in the hotel room playing everyone's favorite song, "I Got You, Babe" by Sonny and Cher. Phil starts out as a self-centered jerk. Initially, each day is a repeat of the previous day. The same mistakes are made repeatedly. Gradually, Phil decides to use the time he has been given to improve himself and help others. He learns to play the piano, to speak French, and to ice sculpt. In the end, he falls in love with Andie MacDowell and the spell is broken.

Phil Collins got a second chance. . . in fact, many second chances. We love it when we get a second chance, a do-over, a mulligan. Jonah got a second chance, too.

We pick up Jonah on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, where the big fish has just spit him out. He has spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish.

### **THE MISSION OF JONAH (Jonah 3:1-2)**

Chapter 3 begins with the statement, "*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time . . .*" God's first message to Jonah was, "*Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.*" (1:2) This time, God does not give Jonah a message. Instead, the second word is terse. Three imperatives make up the re-commission.

Get up. Go. Proclaim the message I give you.

Let me ask you a question. If you were God, would you trust Jonah a second time? Jonah disobeyed.

Jonah refused God. Yet, this time, when God calls, Jonah goes to Nineveh. King David failed. God still used him. Peter denied knowing Jesus. Jesus restored him and he became a leader in the early church.

God is a God of second chances. Jonah ran from God. Jonah prayed to God. Now Jonah lives out of the grace he has experienced from God. Jonah obeys God.

What has changed? Nineveh is still a wicked place. God is still a gracious God who wishes judgment to be proclaimed against Nineveh. Only Jonah has changed. As one commentator has put it, "[Jonah] has been to the depths, wiped his feet on the welcome-mat of the grave and returned. Jonah is not the same man—how could he be?"<sup>i</sup>

The real difference is that Jonah is now willing to obey. He is willing to go to Nineveh because God has spared his life. He will have much time to reflect on everything that has happened to him so far. It will take almost a month traveling by donkey to reach Nineveh.

Like Jonah, God intends that our experience of his grace and mercy is to be extended to others. God desires that our obedience be consistent with his will for us and his will for the world.

Dan Mallough, in his book *Crowded Detours*, tells the following story. A young employee secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars of his business firm's money. When this action was discovered

the young man was told to report to the office of the senior partner of the firm. As he walked up the stairs toward the administrative office the young employee was heavyhearted. He knew without a doubt he would lose his position with the firm. He also feared the possibility of legal action being taken against him. Seemingly his whole world had collapsed.

Upon his arrival in the office of the senior executive the young man was questioned about the whole affair. He was asked if the allegations were true and he answered in the affirmative. Then the executive surprisingly asked this question: "If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?" The young worker brightened up and said, "Yes, sir, you surely can. I've learned my lesson."

The executive responded, "I'm not going to press charges, and you can continue in your present responsibility." The employer concluded the conversation with his younger employee by saying, "I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptation and was shown leniency. I was the first. What you have done, I did. The mercy you are receiving, I received. It is only the grace of God that can keep us both."

#### **THE MESSAGE OF JONAH (Jonah 3:4)**

Jonah arrives on the outskirts of Nineveh. Nineveh is a big city. What we know from history during the lifetime of Jonah is that Assyria has had some difficult years. They are no longer invincible in battle. They are still feared, but their military has peaked. They had experienced an earthquake that caused much devastation. A famine ravaged the land from 765-758 BC. Some territory had been lost to neighboring kingdoms.

The nation was ripe for the word Jonah has from God. Jonah is only a third of the way through the city when the message he is to preach comes from God.

"Forty days more and the city of Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

One message, an obedient but unenthusiastic messenger, little fanfare, minimal effort, and an astounding response. Nineveh repents!

Now would probably be a good time to speak of something important. There are two ways that God reveals Himself. One way is through *natural revelation*. That is, we understand something of who God is in and through the world that God has created. The second way is through *special revelation*. In Scripture, we see several ways that this happens. It occurs through dreams (Joseph), visions (John the Apostle and the Apostle Paul), prophecy (Isaiah and other prophets), the record of Scripture, and finally in the full revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

Often, God will use natural revelation to prepare the way for His special revelation. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. Jonah spends three days and nights in the belly of the fish. God never speaks. We only hear Jonah's prayer to God. However, because of what happens, Jonah repents. He is prepared for God's special revelation when "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."

The same thing is true for the Ninevites. Remember that the Assyrians are Gentiles. It is one of the reasons that Jonah refused to go. As far as Jonah was concerned, they were outside the will and plan of God. They were not worthy of God's love and care. They were not deserving of hearing a call to repentance and faith. God had other plans.

As I researched the sermon this week, I came across a very interesting article. What if God was preparing the people of Nineveh to hear Jonah's message while God was preparing Jonah, a second time, to deliver this message?

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam ruled from 783-741 BC. Although we have no way of knowing with a certainty, it is totally plausible, fits the time frame, and makes much sense from what we know of history that Jonah arrived in Nineveh precisely before a total solar eclipse that occurred on June 15, 763 BC. Computer programs allow us now to use current planetary positions and backtrack or project millennia to know what happened on specific dates in history.

Think about that for a moment. When Jonah arrives at the gates of Nineveh, the stage is set. As Jonah was receptive to a second word of God because he had spent time in the belly of the fish, so the people of

Nineveh including the king were prepared to receive the word God had for the Ninevites. The words are hardly out of Jonah's mouth and the whole city melts in repentance.

Donald Wiseman is an Assyriologist. He is a specialist on the nation, language, religion and culture of Assyria. He is also a former curator of the British Museum and the editor of *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings* and *The Alalakh Tablets*. Wiseman published a lecture in the *Tyndale Bulletin* in 1979. In this lecture, he argued persuasively that a total solar eclipse would help explain the dramatic reaction of the Ninevites to Jonah's preaching.

Wiseman cites Assyrian writings to indicate what a solar eclipse would have meant to the Ninevites: "the king will be deposed and killed, and a worthless fellow will seize the throne...rain from heaven will flood the land...the city walls will be destroyed.' The Assyrians tell us that at such a time, there would be solemn fasting, and the king would hand over his throne to a substitute until the danger passed. At least once when there was a total solar eclipse, the Assyrians cry, 'Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (in Assyrian, *adi arbat umē āninua<sup>ki</sup> innabak*, which can also mean, 'Nineveh shall be made to repent!')." Things that make you go, "Hmmm!"

### THE RESULTS OF JONAH'S PREACHING (Jonah 3:6-9)

Sometimes there is that moment, that special moment, when circumstances bring you to a point of decision. One of my favorite Shakespeare quotes comes from the tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. Its truth is obvious. "There is a tide in the affairs of man, which taken at the flood, leads on the fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries."

Simply put, life presents us with *kairos* moments . . . God moments. There are events and circumstances in which we encounter God, know it is God we encounter, and then God brings us to point of decision. Salvation is offered. Repentance is indicated. We make a choice. The future is determined by that decision. We ever live to remember that moment, regret that moment, or pray for another moment like it where we may have a second chance at a missed opportunity.

I look back to my own life. How many times did I hear the Gospel before I believed it? How many times did Jesus present Himself to me before I said, "Yes!" to what he offered? How many opportunities did God give me before the light of faith sprang into flame in my heart? How many opportunities has God given you?

Assyria did not know Israel's God. They did know solar eclipses. They had even developed a protocol for dealing with a solar eclipse. Now, a stranger enters their midst. A foreigner riding a donkey arrives with a strange message. Only one message of warning, spoken one time. Nineveh will be overthrown in forty days . . . unless.

Unless they repent.

Listen again to what the King of Nineveh decreed: *'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'*

Wow! I wish I could preach a sermon like Jonah preached!

Jonah didn't believe God and sought to flee from God's presence. The Ninevites believed God and sought to enter God's presence. What if Jonah hadn't gone to Nineveh? What if Jonah refused to render the word that God gave him for Nineveh? There would have been no fasting, no repentance, no turning from evil, and no crying out to God. What if Ananias had been so fearful that he refused to receive Saul after his encounter with Jesus?

And how do we know that Saul had changed? How did Ananias know? The same way we know the Ninevites repented. In Acts 9, the passage read this morning, there is a brief line in the vision God gives Ananias. You may have missed it. *"At this moment he is praying, and he has seen a vision of a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."* (Acts 9:11-12)

Saul prays. He has fasted for three days. The Ninevites cry mightily to the God of the Hebrews. They pray. They fast and humiliate themselves by wearing sackcloth, the traditional sign of grief. They turn away from their sin and the turn to the God of the Hebrews.

Revival comes to Nineveh.

An old rabbi used to say to his congregation, "Repent the day before you die."

But someone said to him, "Rabbi, we do not know the day on which we shall die. How then shall we repent the day before?"

The Rabbi replied, "Then repent today."

That was God's message for Nineveh. That was the word Jonah delivered, however half-heartedly. The amazing this is that the Word of God given in a timely manner will do amazing things when it is met with faith. Hebrews 4:12 records these words, *"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* In Isaiah 55:10-11 God reveals, *"For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purposed, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* Proverbs 15:23 affirms, *"To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!"*

Jonah speaks eight words in our English translation and a whole city repents and turns to the Lord. Talk about a word in due season!

Some years ago, two teenagers with a long history of crime and misbehavior robbed a YMCA on the lowest East Side of New York City. On the way out they saw a young man at the telephone switchboard. They were frightened and assumed that the man must be calling the police. They held and beat him violently with brass knuckles and a blackjack. They thought he was dead. They hid him behind the swimming pool and escaped.

Later that evening, a woman came to swim. She was walking by the pool and slipped in the man's blood. She screamed and then found Donald Tippet's body.

Tippet lived, but one eye was so badly damaged that it could not be saved. Meanwhile, the two teenagers were arrested and brought to trial. Their past records assured that both would get long sentences. Donald Tippet did an amazing thing. He asked that the judge allow the two young men to be paroled to his charge. He wanted to give them another chance. He believed they could change. One of the boys committed another crime, was caught, and sent to jail. The other boy was receptive to Tippet's kindness. He went to college and then to medical school. He became one of our nation's leading eye surgeons. A reporter, writing about Donald Tippet's amazing story of forgiveness, said of the surgeon's deeds: "I wonder if he ever performs one of those delicate eye operations without thinking of that night in the YMCA and the young man whose forgiveness changed his life!"

Isn't it wonderful that God is a God of second chances? Jonah was given a second chance by God. Nineveh was given a second chance by God. However, wouldn't it be more wonderful if we didn't miss or ignore the first chances when they are given so that a second chance us never necessary?

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory! AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Mackrell, P. (2007). Opening up Jonah (p. 69). Leominster: Day One Publications.