



THREE SECOND CHANCES

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We've been out at sea with Jonah for the past two Sundays. Are you ready to head for shore? When I was in 7th grade, Mrs. Wertz took our science class on a whale watching trip. I don't remember any whales. I felt sea sick the whole time. I'm what they call a land lubber. So I'm happy to say goodbye to this whale or great fish we've been talking about and get to dry land.

We are going to stick with Jonah, though. As you recall, God had given Jonah an assignment to get up and go to the city of Nineveh to speak out against the wickedness there. Instead, Jonah got up and went the opposite direction, finding a boat that would take him as far away as possible. God pursued him, rocking the boat with a fierce storm. The sailors ended up throwing Jonah in the water, and God brought along a great big fish or whale to rescue Jonah. Last week we talked about what it was like for him in that fish, what he learned about God's grace and the process he went through to finally be ready to turn around and receive God's grace. And we left him there at the bottom of the sea, still in the belly of the great fish.

It's too bad Family Sunday was a couple weeks ago instead of today. Because the kids would LOVE the way our story starts out this morning:

Jonah 2:10 – 3:10

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

You just can't go wrong when a story starts out with throwing up! The fish has fulfilled its role in this story, so God sends it back to the beach to spew Jonah out. There's no nice way to put it. You can't say he coughed him up. You can't even say he spit him out. It was honest to goodness vomit. Not a very dignified homecoming for Jonah.

But the man who thought God had hurled him into the ocean forever is no doubt completely grateful to be hurled back onto land. It had all the opposite meaning of being tossed overboard. Then he was bearing the blame. Now he has been forgiven. Then he was in despair. Now he is motivated. Then he was as good as dead. Now he has a new lease on life. Who cares how gross it was – it was a miracle.

It's a second chance. And I see the entire third chapter of Jonah has being a story of second chances.

In May of this year, John Bogle, who is the founder of the financial company, The Vanguard Group, celebrated the 10th anniversary of having a heart transplant. In an article for the Philadelphia Inquirer, he reflected on how it felt to be given a second chance at life. He boiled it down to three main words: Delight, Gratitude and Opportunity. He found that each new experience brought him a level of delight enjoyment that he hadn't known before, of even small things. He described it as "the sun being perpetually aglow." Secondly, he was profoundly grateful to the physicians and the family of the organ donor and to God. At first he couldn't even express it, but he eventually he found the words and wrote to the family to thank them for the gift of a new heart. And then he said he realized that whatever extra years he was given were an opportunity – an opportunity to make an impact on the world, in the areas that mattered most to him.

I have no doubt that Jonah would have concurred with Mr. Bogle's feelings. He must have been extremely delighted to breathe fresh air again, to take in all the sights and sounds and smells. There would be a new joy and appreciation for the simple things in life. It's clear he was grateful – he even said so in his song we studied last week.

But more than anything, his return to dry land -- his second chance -- gave him an opportunity. It was the opportunity to start over and get things right the second time.

In fact, chapter three begins exactly like the start of the book. When you compare the first verse of chapter 3 with the first verse of chapter 1, they're almost identical.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.

It's déjà vu. We've heard these words before. You could start the book from here and never know there were two chapters before it. There is one notable difference, though, and that is Jonah's response. This time he does what God is asking. And even though the mission is the same, Jonah is not the same at this point. His ordeal in the first two chapters has left him much better equipped for delivering this message, in addition to being much more willing.

I've called this sermon "Three Second Chances," but what links those three chances, what's behind them is really a message about God's character. Because in completely different ways, each of the second chances we will look at tells us something about who God is and the way he operates.

With that in mind, let's take a look at **Jonah's second chance**. We just read it. God's word came to him a second time. Jonah's is the only case in the Bible where God repeats his instructions in quite this way. And it's very revealing. Because it shows us what we can expect from God. The first lesson to learn from Jonah's experience is to

God's silence speaks volumes.

As I mentioned earlier, God's instruction to Jonah is almost exactly the same the second time around. Jonah has just openly defied God, not only by refusing to go to Nineveh, but actively running the opposite way. God had to go to great lengths to rescue him from his wayward path and bring him back to land. A great deal has transpired since God first approached Jonah. But God doesn't say one word about it.

The past has been put behind. God doesn't hold it over Jonah's head and say, "All right. You know you really damaged my ability to trust you. I'm going to try this again, but so help me, if you mess up this time..."

That is not how forgiveness works with God. He doesn't hold our past over us for leverage. When he forgives, he forgets.

Isaiah 43:25

I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Our sins are completely blotted out and he doesn't remember them. And God says he does it for himself and his own reasons. He isn't just doing us a favor – he's being true to his own character.

I learned to type on an IBM Selectric typewriter. My typing teacher wouldn't let us make mistakes. When he would time us, our speed only counted if we hadn't made any errors. But at home my dad had an Olivetti 1000 with self correcting ribbon. Do you remember those kinds of typewriters? You backspaced, hit the letter you had mistyped, and it would put some white over the black and make it look almost like you hadn't made a mistake. Almost. There was still a hint of it there.

Then came computers. You could entirely DELETE the wrong letter. Mistakes truly disappeared.

Sometimes in my mind God seems more like a typewriter with a correcting ribbon for my sins – he forgives me, but there's still a little shadow. There's a little mark on the page. He always has in his mind the way I blew it last time.

But when God forgives, it is gone for good. There's no memory of our sin at all. He deletes it and wipes the page clean.

God's forgiveness is complete. He doesn't look at you and see your past. He looks at you and sees your future – all that is yet possible. You are not damaged goods in God's eyes.

His forgiveness goes way beyond forgetting. Someone who has been hurt could forgive the offending person, then choose to not have a future relationship with them. They could just part ways at that point. That would still feel generous.

But God not only forgave Jonah – he reinstated him. He came back to him and trusted him with the original assignment. That's grace – total forgiveness followed by another chance to do the right thing. God has not given up on Jonah, and he doesn't give up on us either.

None of that is pointed out to us in Jonah – God doesn't draw attention to what he's doing. He just does it. And as he sends Jonah out, we learn another principle from this second chance:

God's calling involves risk.

Think about what Jonah is being asked to do. He's leaving his homeland. He's going to a foreign country that has been a long-time enemy of the Israelites. He's going to a people who don't even worship God – they worship a variety of idols. How seriously will they take him? What kind of scandal will it cause back at home, that this prophet of God is wasting his time on foreigners instead of bringing messages to Israel? It's not like there aren't enough problems to address there.

You can see why Jonah might not have been all that excited about jumping into this one. There is danger at every turn.

Following God is a daring adventure. When he calls us, he calls us to be risk takers, because he is a visionary. He sees what we don't and knows what the results can be when we obey. And although it feels risky, it really isn't, because God is bigger than any risk we face. As John said,

1 John 4:4-5

...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

In the early 1900s, there was a missionary by the name of C.T. Studd. Don't let this buttoned down picture fool you – He was a fiery, full-throttle risk taker for God. He gave his life to Christ at 18 and when he was in college, he left England to go to China, to work for another cutting edge missionary named Hudson Taylor. He gave away his entire inheritance, which was quite large for the times. He later went on to India and Africa, going wherever he felt God was calling him.

In describing his philosophy about following God's call, C.T. Studd said, "Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a Rescue Shop within a yard of hell."

That's the attitude of taking risks for God. It doesn't necessarily mean going to Nineveh or China, although it might. But it does mean being willing to step out of our comfort

zones for the sake of doing what God wants. Overcoming fears or inhibitions in order to grow. We talked with our small group leaders this week about what risks they're being asked to take. For some it's a step of faith to just volunteer to pull a group together. Maybe it's a risk for you to be part of a group. Maybe your risk is to talk about your faith with a friend, or to pray with your family about more than just meals.

The Christian life is not one of flat, static sameness. God is constantly prodding us to get up and go. I think that's a refreshing way to think about faith. It's a big adventure where we're constantly discovering and growing. And even though that can be scary, it has huge payoffs. Second chances with God are chances to be part of his incredible work.

Jonah doesn't hesitate this time. He hears God and heads to Nineveh.

Now Nineveh was a very important city -- a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

The Ninevites don't waste any time either. They respond as one people to Jonah's message.

It was such a brief message: Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned. We don't know if Jonah expanded on that or not. Did he just shout that one line over and over? Either way, that was the substance of the message.

So it seems strange that an entire city would react the way they did. What was going on there? A couple of things could have contributed.

The Ninevites worshipped a god called Dagon. He was a God who was part man, part fish. They had a belief that messages from their god came from the sea. Here comes Jonah, probably bleached white, perhaps even surrounded by a few witnesses who had seen the great fish spew him onto the land. He would have instant credibility in Nineveh.

God is fully capable of speaking to people where they are at, of using the languages and terms they understand. Wouldn't it be just like him to not only use the fish to save Jonah but to reach the Ninevites as well?

The other fact is that the message doesn't need to be much if God's Spirit is at work. There have been other cases in history when people have been compelled as a group to respond, simply because of God's Spirit convicting them.

Jonathan Edwards was a Puritan preacher in New England in the 1700s. It is said that he wasn't a very flashy preacher at all. He would read his sermons in a monotone voice and hardly move at all in the pulpit. But he preached one sermon in 1741 that sent his listeners into a total spiritual panic. There was uncontrolled weeping as he preached. At one point he actually asked everyone to quiet down so he could finish. It was a famous sermon and a famous reaction. To read it now, it's hard to understand what happened, just like it's hard to understand what happened in Nineveh. But God's Spirit is powerful, and when he speaks to people as a group, you can expect dramatic results.

So what does the Ninevites' experience teach us? Their second chance shows us that

God's view of sin is serious.

Nineveh is about to be destroyed. According to the first chapter of Jonah, the reason why is because of its wickedness. God says "its wickedness has come up before me." It's like when the smell of the kitchen trash wafts up and hits you in the nose and you say, "Whoa! I've GOT to take that out."

Jonah doesn't specify any particular sins, but the Ninevites don't need to be told. They know. That's true of us, too. If we all were to stop long enough to think about it, we would all have a pretty good idea what in our lives isn't pleasing to God. There's no need to spell it out.

The king doesn't fight it. He says in his decree,

Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

The word for evil ways carries with it the idea of something destructive. It's those destructive, violent patterns that God is most wanting to address.

One of the dangers we face as Christians is losing sight of just how awful sin is to God. We say that if we believe in Jesus, he will take away our guilt. We say that if we confess our sins, he will forgive them. It's that simple. And we can start to think that if it's that easy, sin must not be all that big of a deal. Maybe it's not all that destructive.

But that way of thinking about sin shows we don't really grasp what we mean when we say God is holy. He is pure and set apart from all creation. Nothing that's evil can stand in his presence. Think of God's purity as being like a brilliant, white hot flame. Hebrews

12:29 describes God as being a consuming fire. With fire, any wood that gets too close is going to burn up – not because the fire is angry with the wood, but because that’s what fires do. That’s the nature of fire – it burns. When it stops burning, it’s no longer fire.

God does not have a choice when it comes to dealing with sin. It is opposed to him the way wood is opposed to fire. Some people say, “If God is love, why couldn’t he just forgive everyone without punishing us for it or sending Jesus to the cross?” It’s because God isn’t just love – he’s holy love. He can’t ignore sin without changing his very character.

P.T. Forsyth once wrote, “Holiness and judgment are forever inseparable...The one thing He (God) could not do was simply to wipe the slate and write off the loss. He must either inflict punishment or assume it.”

And that was the brilliance of the cross. God, the holy one, was the only one who could withstand the full force of his own overpowering goodness and purity. The judge took the punishment himself – not just for the weight of one person’s sin, but for the weight of the entire world.

It was enormously costly. God’s forgiveness doesn’t mean sin isn’t important. Just the opposite: sin is such a big deal that God is the only one who can handle its repercussions.

We’re not accustomed to talking about sin anymore. It seems more fitting for the era of Jonathan Edwards or C.T. Studd. Twenty first century America treats it extremely casually. As Christians, we can’t do that without losing sight of who God really is.

The Ninevites showed that they understood the serious nature of their situation. Everybody, clear down to the animals, took part in the repentance. They fasted, they prayed, they covered themselves in sackcloth and ashes. And they changed their behavior.

Sometimes Christians have a tendency to think that taking sin seriously means going around and pointing it out in society, protesting it everywhere and not letting anyone get away with anything. First and foremost, though, treating it seriously means personal repentance and personal behavior changes. There’s enough for each of us to deal with in our own backyards. Jesus said “take the big piece of wood out of your own eye before you go talking about the little speck in your brother’s eye.”

The king issued an edict that every individual had to take seriously, and that’s true for us as well. Sin isn’t a general problem. It’s a very specific problem. It’s a very individual problem. Each one of us has to stop and take a hard look inside. What’s am I living with that’s destructive? What am I living with that’s really evil? An attitude, a fear, a habit...am I calling it something less than sin?

The Ninevites saw in their second chance that God takes sin seriously. They also recognized something else, though. They saw that

God's warnings contain hope.

“Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned” doesn’t sound all that hopeful. It sounds like a death sentence. There’s no out clause. There’s no promise of “If you change, it will be okay.” It’s a flat out statement of doom.

But if it is that cut and dry, why would God say anything in the first place? Why wouldn’t he just strike down the city without any warning?

God himself said this to Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 18:7-8

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

That forty days is a grace period. God gives every opportunity to change – even when it seems like the writing is on the wall and time is up, there may still be hope, because God is a God of hope and a God of love.

As I’ve been saying over the past couple weeks, God’s grace surprises us. It looks different than what we expect or imagine. So often we interpret God’s warning messages as coming from his anger rather than his love. When we know in our hearts that God disapproves of something that’s going on, it feels harsh. When we sense that pang of guilt, we wish God would let up. But those are gifts of grace, giving us one more chance to escape ourselves.

We lived on a very fast and busy street when I was young. There were frequent accidents near our house, because the curve was somewhat blind, and cars would come racing around it.

Our family was outside one day, when my dad looked up and to his horror saw my two year old brother on the far side of the street. My dad ran to him (after looking both ways) and firmly grabbed him and brought him home. You wouldn’t have known initially how happy he was that my brother was safe, because I can still remember him giving him the stern warning, “Road is a No-no!” It sounded harsh and angry, but even at my young age I knew it was coming from my dad’s concern for my brother’s well-being. He wanted him to live.

God is a concerned parent. He wants us to live. Moses told the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live

and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...

Our warped image of God as an angry hothead or a God who is waiting to catch us doing something bad stems from missing the hope that is wrapped up in all his warnings.

That brings us to the third second chance I talked about. The first two are obvious. We knew Jonah needed a second chance from last week. The Ninevites were the destination all along. So what's the third second chance?

It's actually God himself.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

The word translated as "had compassion" here is the same word used for repented. God changed direction. The surprising responsiveness of the Ninevites gave God the opportunity to rethink his approach toward them.

Now we know that God himself does not change, and his will does not change. That is part of what it means for him to be God – he has no need to change, because he's perfect as he is. But circumstances do change, and God is free to alter his course of action to respond to ever-shifting human hearts.

So if in fact, God's will does not change, when his actions do, it reveals more of who he is. His ultimate will must not have been to punish Nineveh, because he didn't go through with it. His ultimate will must have been to show that he loved and cared about the people of that city.

God's second chance shows us that **God's nature is compassionate.**

God could have dug in his heels and said, "No matter what they do, I have spoken, and my word is law, so I'm going to carry out this destruction regardless of what they say."

He would have every right to do that.

D.A. Carson puts it this way:

The God who rightly confronts us in wrath because of our sin nevertheless meets us in grace because he is that kind of God.

I always come back to the time Moses asked if he could see God, and God said, "you can't see my face, but I'll make my glory pass by you. Then this is what happened:

Exodus 34:5-7

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Out of all the ways God could identify himself – holy, righteous, wise, powerful – he chose to say that he’s compassionate and gracious and loving.

When we give God the opportunity, when we respond to him and he has another chance to reveal himself to us, that’s what he wants us to see. Yes, he’s pure. Yes he judges sin. But behind it all is a loving, compassionate heart that wants to see his children live.

Those famous verses in Lamentations say this:

Lamentations 3:22-23

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.

What kind of second chance are you needing today? As you think about what we’ve seen this morning, here are some questions to consider:

Is there sin in my life that I’m not taking seriously? Am I accepting God’s forgiveness without acknowledging what it cost him? Maybe there’s something about my behavior that needs to change to show I understand the mercy he’s given me.

Am I living with shadows of my past? Do I believe that God really forgets my sins completely and gives me a fresh start? His mercies are new every morning. Each day I can start with a clean slate.

What risk is he asking me to take? Jonah stepped outside his comfort zone. What sort of move is he calling you to? Maybe it’s just responding to him and saying “Okay, Lord, I give in.” Maybe he’s asking you to dig deeper in your own faith. Risk means pushing past what feels natural, to catch a vision and be daring. Maybe he’s asking you to set up a rescue shop within a yard of hell. God’s second chances for us are chances to be involved in what he’s doing, chances to show the rest of the world what a compassionate God we have. It’s a big, bold adventure. Are we ready?