

(Jonah) the Depths of Hell - Part 3

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes God's grace as the God of second chances through the story of Jonah's renewed commission and our own struggles with obedience.

Duration: 38:54

Scripture: Jonah 3:1

Topics: "Jonah", "God's Grace", "Second Chances"

Description

John Vissers emphasizes the theme of second chances in the story of Jonah, illustrating how God renews Jonah's commission after his initial disobedience. Jonah, having faced the consequences of running from God, is given another opportunity to fulfill his calling to preach to Nineveh. The sermon draws parallels between Jonah's experience and our own struggles with obedience, highlighting that God is always ready to extend grace and mercy, even when we stumble. Vissers encourages listeners to recognize that the Christian journey is filled with challenges, but God's persistent call invites us back into His service. Ultimately, the message is one of hope, reminding us that the game is only half over, and we can always return to God for a fresh start.

Transcript

Turn with me tonight for our continuing study of the book of Jonah. Tonight we're going to read in the third chapter, and read the first four verses of the third chapter. Jonah chapter 3 at verse 1. 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. Now Nineveh was a very large city.

It took three days to go all through it. Jonah started into the city going a day's journey, and he proclaimed, 40 more days and Nineveh will be destroyed. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word this evening.

Let's pray together, shall we? Father, we do thank you tonight for your word. We thank you for your gospel, and we pray this evening that as we continue in our study of Jonah, that your gospel would come not only with word, but also in power with full assurance in the power of your Holy Spirit. Through Christ our Lord we pray, amen.

One of the nice things about being a preacher and a teacher is that people give you all kinds of stories and illustrations. And this past week I received a story, an illustration that I want to use by way of introduction tonight. It's from Guy Sinclair.

I thank him for it. And it's a wonderful introduction, really, I think, to the theme that we want to consider this evening. It's a good story to me because it's a story about football, and I love stories about football and stories about sports.

And it's a story about a true football game, a game that was played on New Year's Day 1929, when Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. And in that game, a man named Roy Regals recovered a fumble for California. But somehow, in the midst of what was happening, he got confused, and he started running in the opposite direction.

Instead of running to the opposing team's goal, he started running toward his own goal line. And he started running about 65 yards in the wrong direction towards his own goal line. Well, one of his teammates started after him.

His other teammates, as you can well imagine, were yelling at him, screaming at him. But amidst all the confusion and the noise in the stadium, he didn't hear them. He just started running toward his own goal line.

This other teammate ran after him, was a little faster, and tackled him just about 5 or 10 yards before he went over his own goal line and would have scored for the opposing team. Well, when California came to punt, they found themselves now about at their own 5 or 10 yard line, so they started to prepare to punt, and they prepared to punt the ball. And what happened is that the ball was blocked, Tech blocked the kick, and they scored a safety, and that safety touch, that safety point, became actually the margin of victory in the game.

Now, this all happened in the first half of the game. And everyone was watching, and everyone was asking the same question, what's going to happen in the second half? Will the coach put in Roy Regals in the second half of the game? So the players filed off the field, and they went into the dressing room, and they sat down on the benches, and some of them sat down on the floor, and all of them but Regals, he put a blanket around his shoulders, he kind of slumped over, put his head in his hands, and he started to cry like a baby. Well, if you've ever played football, or if you've ever played any sport, you'll know that usually what happens during the halftime is that the coach rants and raves and tries to motivate the team and prepare them for the second half, but during that second, during that halftime break, the coach said absolutely nothing.

He just sat there in complete silence, and everyone sat in that locker room in complete silence. No doubt he was trying to figure out what to do in the second half, whether he should put Regals back in the game, whether he should go out and play with the same team that had started the first half. Well, the referee came in and announced that there were about three minutes before playing time.

The coach looked around the locker room, he looked at the team, and then he simply said, the same team that started the first half will start the second half. The same players who played in the first half will play in the second half. The players got up and started out, all of them, except Regals.

He continued to sit there, kind of slumped over. The coach yelled out his name, come on, we're going out onto the field. He continued to sit there, so the coach went over and sat down beside him, and he said, Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will also start in the second half.

Regals looked up at the coach and he said, Coach, I can't go out there and play again. I've ruined you, I've ruined our university team, I've ruined myself. I can't possibly face the crowd in the stadium to save my life.

You're going to have to go on without me. And then Coach Regals reached out and he put his, the coach reached out and put his hand on Regals' shoulder, and he said to him, Roy, get up and go back out onto that field, because the game is only half over. And Regals went back, and he played, and he played with intensity, and he played with concentration, and he played with focus, and those who saw that game said that they'd never seen anyone play with such determination and commitment as did Roy Regals in the second half of that game, that football game in 1929.

He got a second chance to prove himself. And in our passage tonight, Jonah gets a second chance to prove himself. You'll remember that Jonah had been given a job to do.

He'd been told by God to go to Nineveh, but he picked up the ball and he runs in the opposite direction to Tarshish. But he finds himself stopped by God, who takes him down long before he can reach Tarshish. He's tossed overboard into the sea.

He sent a fish to rescue him. He's on the brink of death itself, but as he faces death, as he's on the edge, the Lord remembers mercy in the midst of wrath. And the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and after three days and three nights, Jonah found himself on dry land once again.

And as we saw last week, he'd been saved by the grace of God through faith in response to what God had done for him, and he was saved for good works, for the call that God had given to him. And so tonight we come to the beginning of Chapter 3, and what we discover is that Jonah's life begins again. He gets a chance to play in the second half.

He gets a chance to try again. He gets an opportunity to kind of gather himself together and to fulfill the call that God has for his life. And as we think into this text tonight, I want us to realize that that's often how it is in our lives.

William Banks, in his commentary on Jonah, says that we are moved to speak of Jonah's God as the God of the second chance. But honest and sober reflection compels the saint to speak of him as the God of the 999th chance, that God gives us opportunities, even when we stumble, even when we fall, even when we find ourselves along the side of the road out of the game, God gives us an opportunity to get back up and to get back in the game again. He picks us up and puts us back on the road, on the pathway of discipleship.

Well, let's look then at this opening paragraph of the third chapter and think together and seek to discern the lessons that the Lord has for us there as we consider what it means that Jonah is given this second opportunity, this second chance to fulfill God's call to his life. The first thing I want us to notice is that the chapter opens with a renewal of Jonah's commission. Now, I don't know about you, but I've often wondered what Jonah was thinking when he found himself back on shore again, after he'd been spit up by this big fish, after having spent these horrific three days inside the belly of this great fish.

Here he is, he finds himself on dry land again, and you can only begin to wonder what's going through his mind. I mean, what's he thinking about? What could he possibly be reflecting on as he considers the experience that he's just gone through? He might have been thinking that the Lord was now going to put him on a kind of spiritual probation, that he really wasn't going to have an opportunity to be a prophet any longer because he'd blown it, and so now he was going to be put on spiritual probation until he had an opportunity to demonstrate that he had been spiritually rehabilitated. And in fact, that's what we often do when someone blows it.

We put them on the sidelines until they can prove to us, until they can demonstrate to us that in fact they deserve to be given a second chance, until they show adequate signs of repentance and remorse. Well, Jonah may have thought that he was going to be taken out of the prophetic game for good. Or, perhaps Jonah thought he was finally clear of this Nineveh commission, this Nineveh call to his life.

God had obviously determined that Jonah was not up to the challenge of preaching to pagans. Perhaps Jonah thought, God's finally realized that he's got the wrong guy here, and he's going to have to find someone else to go to Nineveh. And perhaps he's breathing a kind of sigh of relief knowing that he's going to be able to go back home and perhaps become a respectable Jewish prophet once again, just among his own people.

And think of the great stories now that he'd be able to tell based on his experiences. Think about the great testimony he'd be able to give. Surely the Lord would use this experience, this thing that had happened in his life, in order to help him minister to his own people.

I can almost imagine him going out onto the dinner circuit to give his testimony or writing a bestselling book, sharing this experience that he's gone through. But going home, going back to Israel, going back to his own people, going back to what he knew best, and being freed from this commission to go to Nineveh. But of course you know that that's not what the Lord had in mind at all for Jonah.

And the text says in verse 1, When 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. Now when Jonah heard that word, I wonder what went through his mind. Not again, Lord.

Not again. The same commission, the same call, the same call and commission that Jonah had received in the first chapter of the first verse of the first chapter of this book is repeated again. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.

You see, the commission is renewed. The call is extended to Jonah a second time. And Jonah is now given the opportunity, which he refused in the first instance, to do what God wanted him to do, to do what God willed.

The Lord repeats the original order. Nothing has changed, except this time Jonah is expected, as he was in the first instance, but this time Jonah is expected, in light of his experience, to obey the word of the Lord and to obey the commission that had come to him. He's given an opportunity to prove the sincerity of his repentance by doing what God wants.

This prophet, who has feet of clay, is given an opportunity to prove, to demonstrate, that in fact he can, he will, fulfill the will of God for his life. And I want to suggest to you this evening that that's really the first lesson that we need to learn from this part of the story in the book of Jonah. There is no question but that

the God of the Bible is the God of the second chance.

Now we're not talking about some kind of a doctrine of the second chance in the next life, but we are talking about the gospel of God's grace, in which he comes to us again and again and again in the midst of life, by his grace, to extend his mercy to us. The gospel of the grace of God is the good news about a second chance in this life, that when we stumble and fall and run, God continues to come to us in mercy. But it is never, and this is the important point of the application, it is never so that we can continue simply to do what we want, when we want, how we want to do it.

You see, God does not give us a second chance to make us feel good. God does not give us a second chance somehow because we deserve it. God does not give us a second chance so that we may continue to fly in the face of his will for our lives.

But God gives a second chance to demonstrate his grace, and to give us an opportunity to respond to his sovereign call to our lives, so that we will become conformed to the image of his Son, so that we will walk in step with the Spirit of God, so that we will indeed do what is the will of God for our lives. You see, the God of the second chance is a God whose will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I don't know about you, but it has been my experience that sometimes you stumble and you fall in the pathway of discipleship.

Sometimes you deliberately veer from the road that you know God is leading you down. There are all kinds of reasons why these things happen, why we make certain choices rather than other choices. Sometimes we fall out of the will of God for our lives through neglect, sometimes through ignorance because we've not been seeking his word and seeking his will diligently.

Sometimes it's through deliberate, willful disobedience because we simply don't want to do what we know God wants us to do. Sometimes God's will seems too difficult for us. I was speaking with a young woman this past week who was telling me very clearly that she knew what God's will was for her in a particular situation, but she also confessed that she did not have the strength to do it and that she didn't want to do it, and that was the struggle, the wrestling of her life.

And the message of Jonah at this point is when we find ourselves in those situations, when we find ourselves alongside of the road instead of on it, out of the game instead of in it, the God whom we serve is the God of the second chance. And perhaps there is something in your life tonight that the Lord wants to speak to you about, that the Lord wants to open up for you a second opportunity, a second chance to go back and undo something that you've done or perhaps do something that you didn't do and that you should have done. The God of the Bible is the God of a second chance.

But secondly, notice then that Jonah accepts the challenge. Jonah, it says, obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now I have to confess to you that as I read this, I'm not yet convinced that Jonah is altogether a happy camper.

I suspect it has to do with the fact that I've read ahead into chapter four and I know how the story ends, and perhaps some of you do as well. But I'm not yet convinced that Jonah is absolutely certain that he wants to do the will of God. He still has a lot to learn about doing the will of God.

In chapter one, he knew the will of God, but he didn't do it. That's one of the problems we often face in the life of discipleship. We know the will of God, but we don't want to do it.

Now in chapter three, he knows the will of God and he does the will of God, but the question is, does he really will the will of God? Does he want to do the will of God for his life? He obeys, certainly. He obeys God's word. He does God's will, but is he at this point absolutely happy about it? I'm not sure yet he wants it.

I'm not sure he wills the will of God for his life. Does he will, is he allowing his will to be conformed to the will of God, or is he going along with some reservation, or with resignation, or even with some resentment? I mean, after all, he knows what happens if you don't do God's will. You end up in the ocean and then in the belly of a fish, and he certainly doesn't want to go through that experience again.

So perhaps he feels he has no other choice, but at this point in his life to kind of buckle under and do the will of God for his life. Now don't misunderstand me here. I am not, by suggesting this, and the commentators who suggest we interpret Jonah 3 in this way, we're not suggesting that Jonah's repentance is insincere.

We're not in any way suggesting that Jonah was not really converted in the midst of his experience inside the belly of the fish and as he found himself in the ocean. I mean, as you read chapter 2, as you read the song of chapter 2, you see how real it is. And we've looked at that the last couple of messages together.

It is a genuine repentance. It is a genuine conversion. He really was born again and given a new chance at life.

And there is no doubt that there is a certain sense in which at this point he is now prepared to obey the word of the Lord this time. But Jacques Allure, in his commentary, his book on Jonah, I think puts his finger nicely on the dilemma here. He says, even after the new birth, Jonah is still a man of flesh and blood.

He is still in our image. He is not perfect. He is capable of anger and self-justification and despair.

He has not become a plaster saint. And I suggest to you that's what makes Jonah's story and what makes Jonah's experience so real for all of us as believers who live our lives in these days. It is a lesson both in humility and consolation.

Because, you know, sometimes we read stories like this in the Bible and we think that after someone has had an experience like this, life is rosy. Everything goes good from that point forward. And that's often how we portray the Christian life.

Once you become a Christian, everything is going to be fine. There are no longer any struggles. Once you've had a real experience of God's intervention in your life, you will automatically always live in tune with the will of God.

You will always keep in step with the Spirit of God. You will always do what God wants you to do. We have the idea that when God moves into our lives in this way, that somehow it makes it a whole lot easier to be a disciple of Jesus.

I mean, if you had gone through an experience like Jonah went through, surely you would think to yourself, boy, that would make it a whole lot easier to be a follower, wouldn't it? Because I would then know that I needed to obey the will of the Lord. But you see, the Christian life and the call of God to our lives is never that simple and never that easy. It's always a struggle.

That's why I like that book that John White wrote a number of years ago that was published by InterVarsity Press, a book on the Christian life which was called *The Fight*. There's always that ongoing struggle. Even after we experience the reality of God confronting us in the midst of life, still we doubt.

Still we struggle. Still we bump up against the will of God in our lives. That's why the Apostle Paul speaks about the Christian life as an ongoing struggle, a struggle between the old self and the new self which is emerging by grace.

Remember what he says in Romans chapter 7? Let me just read it for you. It's a wonderful, wonderful text. Romans chapter 7 at verse 14.

He says, We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. This is a profound insight, I think, into human will and human psyche. I do not understand what I do, for what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do.

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me that is in my sinful nature.

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do, nor the evil I do not want to do. This I keep on doing.

Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work. When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am, who will rescue me from this body of death. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So that I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. You see, what Paul is saying here, and what is true of Jonah's experience, is that running from God is not something you do once. It's not something you do twice.

It's not something you do three times. But rather it's a condition in which we live. And even after you become a Christian, there's still that struggle between the old self that wants to run away from God and the new self born again by the Spirit of God, regenerated by the grace of God, which wants to run toward God and do God's will.

Even after becoming a Christian, even after obeying God, sometimes we continue to doubt, to wonder, to wander, to run from God. Or we do God's will with resentment or resignation. See, growth in grace is growth in the knowledge of God.

It's growth in the heartfelt experience of God. And it's growth in conforming our wills, so that they're conformed to the will of God for us in Jesus Christ. And so as we live, we grow in all of these areas of our lives, and we learn what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And so Jonah knows the will of God. He certainly does the will of God. But there's still growth.

There's still struggle. And so it is for all of us in the Christian faith and in the Christian life. And then thirdly, notice that Jonah accomplishes the task that has been assigned to him.

Jonah, it says, starts preaching throughout what I've described here as the greater Nineveh area. And he delivers a rather unpopular message. Now, let's not forget the difficulty of the task which is confronting him here.

Let's not forget the immensity of the challenge. First of all, the city was large. Nineveh was a very large city.

And the text says that it took three days to go all through it. Now, that could mean that the city was so large that it actually took three days to walk across it. Or it could mean that it took three days to go through the city carefully for Jonah to find his way, to wind his way through city streets and through all the public places that he needed to preach the gospel.

We're not sure. We do know that the city proper was about eight miles in circumference and that the center of the city had a rail around it. And that within the rail, one would find a great deal of the business establishments in the city of Nineveh, the king lived there, the government, and many of the wealthy people.

But out beyond the city wall, there was a kind of sprawling suburb where people lived in row houses. The poor, the working class, the middle class, as it were, people who lived and worked day by day. And so Jonah is commissioned to preach in and around Nineveh.

And it no doubt would have been a formidable challenge for this reason alone, a difficult task. But then think also about the fact that not only is Nineveh a large city, but remember that Jonah is a stranger in a foreign land. He's a stranger and an alien.

He's gone to another people, to a different culture, to a different land where the people were not known to him. He's a missionary out on the edge. And then notice as well that he has, of course, a very unpopular message to deliver.

I mean, it's a lot easier to deliver a good message than it is to deliver a message of judgment, but that's what Jonah is commissioned to deliver to the people of Nineveh. And who wants to deliver a message of judgment? I mean, who wants to tell people that they're going to lose their homes, that businesses will collapse, that the government will fall, that people may well lose their lives, that the city is going to be destroyed? But Jonah, to his credit, having heard God's commission, having taken up the second chance given to him, goes and he preaches this message to these people. He takes up the challenge.

He accomplishes the task. He's given a second chance to run with the ball into the heart of Nineveh, and one can only imagine that he preaches like he's never preached before, that he's given freedom and liberty to preach the message that has been entrusted to him because, as we'll discover, there was a response. There was a response to the preaching of the message.

And so I want to suggest to you this evening that the good news of the gospel in the book of Jonah is that the God of the Bible is the God of the second chance. I don't know whether you've ever looked at the Bible this way, but the Bible is filled with weak people, with people whose lives are frail and feeble, people with feet of clay, people who run away and hide when the going gets tough. Think of Abraham.

Abraham lied to protect himself, and yet God made out of him a great nation. Think of Moses, stumbling and mumbling on that mountain, saying that there's no way he could possibly do what God was asking him to do, to go back to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery, into freedom, and into the promised land.

Think of David.

David, who we think of a great man of faith, a great king of Israel, but who at critical moments in his life stumbled and fell. Think of Psalm 51, that psalm of repentance, of sorrow, after he not only had an affair with Bathsheba, but then arranged to have her husband killed on the front line of battle. Think of Esther, who didn't at first want to do what her cousin was suggesting that she ought to do, that is, speak to the king because she was afraid, and yet she was persuaded that perhaps she had come to the kingdom for such a time as this, finally doing the will of God.

Think of Rahab, a prostitute used by God to help God's people at a critical moment in their lives. Or think about the New Testament. Think about Thomas.

Thomas, who wasn't there when the Lord appeared to the disciples, and he wouldn't believe that Jesus was alive until he was confronted by Jesus himself, until he could see the marks in his hands and in his feet. Or perhaps most powerfully of all of them, think of Peter. Peter denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times.

He stumbled and he fell three times as he sat around that fire and as they asked him whether he was one of those Galileans, whether he was acquainted and a disciple of this Jesus who had been arrested. Three times he denied the Lord. But do you remember in John 21 what happens? The risen Lord comes and meets his disciples and he meets Peter on the beach and the Lord asks Peter, do you love me? And he asks Peter, do you love me, not once, not twice, but three times.

Because you see, at that moment, Peter is being forgiven for his three-fold denial of Jesus by Jesus three times giving him an opportunity to again state his love and his commitment to Jesus. Peter is given a second chance and a third chance and other opportunity to serve the Lord. What about you? All of us run from God.

All of us at some point or another run from God. And there may be something in your life tonight that you want simply to run away from God about. That you're not sure that you can do the will of God or you're sure that you don't want to do the will of God or perhaps you've stumbled and you've fallen in the Christian life and you may think that you don't deserve a second chance.

Well, you're right. You don't deserve a second chance. But that's what grace is.

Grace is getting a second chance when you don't deserve a second chance. God's mercy means we don't get what we do deserve and God's grace means we do get what we don't deserve. Another opportunity, the forgiveness and the freedom to do what God is calling us to do.

You see, it may be tonight, my friend, as you've come into this church, that the Lord Jesus, as he's present in our midst, wants to come and sit down beside you in the pew where you're sitting before you leave tonight and put his arm around you and say to you, Get up. The game is only half over and I'm sending you back in. If you hear that voice tonight, will you respond? Will you respond? Let us pray.

Father, we confess tonight that we come out of the busyness of life, out of the challenge of life, out of the struggle of life, and there are so many times when we stumble and when we fall. And we pray this evening that indeed we might hear your voice of assurance of welcome, of forgiveness in our lives. We thank you that you're the God of the second chance and the third chance and the fourth chance, that in our weakness and frailty and sinfulness you never abandon us, just like you did not abandon Jonah.

Help us, Lord, to be sensitive to what you are saying to us tonight. Help us to hear your word to us and may it not only challenge us, but may it renew us and strengthen us for the week ahead. We ask it in the name of Christ our Savior.

Amen.

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