

Second Chances

Jonah 1-3

Today, when you leave this place, there are three things I want you to know. I first want you to know that our God is a God of new beginnings and second chances. No matter what you have done, no matter how bad you have blown it, He has a new beginning for you.

Second, I want you to know about grace; grace is the key that opens the door of second chances—God’s grace to us, and our grace to others!

Three, with our God, nothing is impossible.

This is so important I want to say it again.

Our God is a God of new beginnings and second chances. No matter what you have done, no matter how bad you have blown it, He has a new history for you.

Second, grace—grace is the key, that opens the door of second chances—God’s grace to us and our grace to others!

Three, with our God nothing is impossible.

Now, if we believed these three things, truly believed them, just imagine the ramifications that has for our lives, our world—minds blown.

Let the truth of this reality sink in for just a second.

Imagine a world full of new beginnings and second chances.

Imagine a world where Grace flowed unstoppable, un-dam-able, like the Niagara Falls.

Imagine a world where nothing is impossible. A world where no matter what you have done, no matter how bad you have blown it, no matter how much someone hates you, God has a new plan for you—a new history for you.

Imagine a world where there was a God, who no matter what you said about him, did to him, no matter how long you have ignored him, regardless of the ways you dishonored him, betrayed him, or even killed him, he is willing to give you a second chance before you are even willing to accept it.

Imagine a world in which no matter what you did, where you went, how far you traveled, you could not out run God's love.

Imagine how much differently we would live, could live, if we were "convinced," CONVINCED, "that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

There is a word for this kind of thinking —Gospel, Good news—and it is what we believe about God, and more than that, it is what we believe God believes about us.

Think about that, there is nothing, NOTHING we can do to out run his love for us—and believe me people have been trying for centuries beginning with Adam and Eve, yet there is no where we can go to hide from his mercy because he pursues us with an unrelenting love all the way to the grave.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells the story of a man who wasn't "happy." This man thought his family was limiting his happiness and he couldn't wait to leave the house to escape the confining atmosphere of his life at home.

After he left, when his life had become a shambles, he came to himself and remembered how his father loved him and hoped if he returned, his father might at least show him mercy. Only, in returning home, not only did he receive mercy he learned he never did escape his father's love.

This isn't just in the New Testament thought; it's throughout the whole Bible. The Bible is a story of new beginnings and second chances and over and over again it is God's grace to us and our grace to others that has opened the doors for the good news to come flooding in. Throughout the Bible, we read story after story about how with our God nothing is impossible.

Now some of you are thinking, yeah whatever, but God, can't use me, wouldn't use me, there's no future for me, not after what I have done, not after what has been done to me, and you and feel as if you are doomed to live out your lives hiding in the shadows of the walls of regret.

Yet, when I think about all the ways I have blown it, all the ways I have failed God, failed other people, all the ways I have failed to live up to the best in my own faith, I

remember I am in good company. Quite honestly, the Bible is filled with stories about people with pasts of which to be ashamed.

Noah was a drunkard, Moses was a murderer, Rahab was prostitute, David was a liar and adulterer, Solomon did evil in the eyes of God, Jonah flat out disobeyed God and ran away, Peter denied Jesus, Paul persecuted those who professed Jesus.

Quite honestly, anytime our past tries to get in the way of God promises for our futures we need to remember we are in good company, with others just like us, who were given second chances and new futures. People just like us were unable to outrun the goodness and grace of God.

I often hear people say they don't like reading the Old Testament because in the OT God is a God of anger and wrath, but they like the New Testament because God is so loving and gracious. I had been guilty of saying this until I actually read both the Old and New Testaments.

I am guessing the Pharisees that Jesus rebuked on a regular basis in the New Testament understood pretty well the anger and wrath of God, and quite honestly, two of the most gracious stories about a loving God are found not in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament.

If you want to have your heart broken by the depth of God's love for you, read the book of Hosea. If you want to read a story about second chances and new beginnings, read the story of Jonah.

Jonah was hanging out at home, doing whatever he did, minding his own business when God shows up and sends him on an errand. He wants Jonah to travel nearly 500 miles to the city of Nineveh (Northern Iraq), and in the words of the Bible, "preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2)

If you lived in Nineveh, this would be a good time to list the house and pack up the RV. When Jonah heard these instructions, he immediately got up, ran to the docks, bought a ticket on a boat and headed 2000 miles in the opposite direction; he boarded the ship, went below deck, and fell asleep thinking he had managed to get away from God.

It wasn't long before a huge storm hit the boat. His shipmates prayed to their gods, jettisoned their cargo, but still they were in trouble, so the captain wakes Jonah up to pray to his God. While he is trying to convince Jonah to pray, the other shipmates

are trying to figure out who ticked off what god. While they had not known who Jonah was or who his God was, they figured out it was his fault.

When Jonah is confronted, he admits it's his fault. He admits "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Someone had to be thinking "Really? You try to run away from you God on a boat when you know He created the sea? Really?"

Once they figured out who he was, who his God was, and what Jonah had done, all that was left was to figure out what they needed to do.

Jonah's solution was to toss him overboard. Is this crazy to anyone else? He doesn't offer to repent, he doesn't offer to pray, doesn't offer to obey, but he does offer to let them kill him. Maybe he figured a drowning at sea would be a good excuse for not completing the assignment he had been given.

Reading this you get a really good idea that Jonah really, really did not want to go to Nineveh. He really didn't want to go to those godless heathens who probably would not take kindly to strangers showing up and telling them what to do.

But God wasn't ready to let Jonah off the hook that easy; as crazy as it sounds, God really cared about those Ninevites and had a message for them. He didn't want them to keep going the way they were going; He just wanted them to come home—to be His people so He could be their God.

After hearing Jonah's proposal, the sailors did the best they could to row back to shore, but it wasn't happening, so they asked God for forgiveness for what they were about to do and reluctantly, they make Jonah walk the proverbial plank, giving him the heave-ho. As soon as he's gone, the water's calm—which must have terrified the sailors even more and in Jonah 1:16 it tells us, "At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him."

It was probably a bit short sighted as an evangelism technique, but it worked, and these men are all given a second chance in life.

Then there's Jonah.

Rather than allowing Jonah to die, God chooses to save him and sends a big fish to swallow him, giving Jonah some time to think about what he had done. Who knew God invented the "time out?"

In the belly of the fish, Jonah came to his senses and told God he was sorry. A few days later the fish began to wonder if he had eaten some bad human and gotten food poisoning and the fish projectile vomited him up on the shore.

When God teaches a lesson, he teaches a lesson.

Then God gives Jonah a second chance. In chapter 3:1-2 it reads, “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, still smelling like the main course at a sushi bar, heads to Nineveh and reluctantly delivers his message, all the while hoping the people would ignore God’s warning so God would destroy the place, like a Sodom and Gomorrah moment part two.

Once his message was delivered, he found a nice spot on a hill (probably as far away from the ocean as he could) and sat down and waited for the fire to rain down from heaven. The problem was, the fireworks never came.

Jonah’s message was more powerful than he reckoned. Or maybe somewhere between Jonah’s lips and the Ninnevides ears, the Holy Spirit interceded. Either way, the people of Nineveh actually took him seriously, turned things around, and cried out to God— and God heard them.

They began to fast, they began to mourn and repent for their sins; they put on sackcloth as a sign of repentance, they were so sorry for what they had done and how they had disobeyed that the king himself declared, “Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals 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.” (Jonah 3:7-9)

Did you catch that? They were so completely repentant that they even made their animals fast, and they covered their herds with sackcloth. This is as crazy as the story I once heard about a prophet who was swallowed by a fish.

The preacher in me wonders, “Man what was it that Jonah said that caused this revival? This had to be a power sermon, like the one Peter would later preach at Pentecost.”

But it wasn't. It wasn't good news at all. It was almost anti-Gospel, giving no hope, no possibility of reconciliation, etc. He simply said, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4)

He was Chicken Little, "The sky is falling." You blew it and now you are going to get it. It stinks to be you.

The prophet who was given a second chance wants to make sure the people don't, but he knew his God was a God of second chances and new beginnings, which is why he didn't want to come in the first place.

He knew grace was the key that unlocked the door to second chances, which was why he refused to show any. He knew that with His God all things were possible and that even a pagan people like the Ninevites couldn't out run God's love—and because of that, he tried to run.

We can't give him a lot of credit for being a faithful prophet, but we can give him credit for not underestimating the grace and love of God.

Now, I didn't grow up in the church. The first time I ever read or heard this story was as an adult, and quite honestly, it sounded like a fish tale to me. Hearing a story about a grown man getting swallowed by a fish and living for three days, to me that sounded like the stuff of TMZ or internet hoaxes.

Then when I asked about what this passage meant, people told me the moral was clear, "Don't run from God or he'll send a storm to shipwreck your life, and then you will end up being swallowed by a fish so you can think about what you have done until you are good and sorry. The whole time I heard this explanation, I heard the theme song to Jaws playing in the background of my mind.

The problem is, this explanation didn't add up to me because, well, I'm from Nineveh. My whole family is from Nineveh. All of my friends are from Nineveh.

Everybody I love is from Nineveh and, as a Ninevite, when I read this story, when I tell it to my children, my friends, my family, my neighbors, I'm not reading a story about a God who shipwrecked my life and is threatening to have me swallowed by a fish so I can think about what I have done. No, I read a story about a God who loves me so much that when my life hits rock bottom, I can cry out to Him and He hears and answers.

In this passage there are no “I told you so” lectures; there are no “How sorry are you?” questions. There is just a God who hears and answers—a God who loves people—even fleeing prophets, sea sick sailors, and naughty Ninevites; a God who spares sailors, disciplines flight risks, and redeems nations.

This is all because He is a God of new beginnings and second chances. No matter what we have done, no matter how bad we have blown it, He has a new beginning for us.

And it is grace—His grace—that is the key that opens the door of second chances... it's God's grace to us and then our grace to others! With this kind of God, nothing is impossible.

Altar Call for Second Chances and New Beginnings for:

- Ninevites
- Sea sick sailors caught up in someone else's sin
- Fleeing prophets among us.