

JONAH - RETURNING TO GOD

DL Moody once told this story - In the Highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places that they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they will jump down ten or twelve feet, and then they can't jump back again and the shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint that they cannot stand, and then they will put a rope around him, and he will go over and pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death. "Why don't they go down there when the sheep first gets there? I asked. "Ah!" he said, "they are so very foolish they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if they did." Moody concludes his story by saying: "And this is the way with men; they won't go back to God till they have no friends and have lost everything."

Today we are continuing our series looking at the book of Jonah. Last week we looked at the cause and results of running from God. This week we will look at how to return to God and be forgiven.

Jonah 2:1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. 2 He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. 3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. 4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' 5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. 7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. 8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. 9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD." 10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. 3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Today I am not going to get into whether or not this was a fish or a whale. I do not think that is the point of the story. I am also not going to get into how Jonah was able to survive 3 days underwater. This was a miracle, and miracles are, by definition, miraculous. I am always amazed at how people, sometimes even Christians, feel like they have to explain God's miracles. Well, maybe this was a whale and it had swallowed a lot of air etc. The fact is that, at just the right moment, in just the right place, God did something supernaturally. I do not think HOW God did it is the point. I want to look at WHY God did it. What was the reason?

Running from God put Jonah in a very dangerous position. But God had not abandoned him. The fish was God's miraculous provision, it was his supernatural Uber to rescue him from the sea and get him back to dry land. Like the prodigal son, He may allow him to sink to the lowest depths of life, but He never forsakes them. How do you return to God after running from Him?

You may not have run from God like Jonah did, but along the way you have let your relationship with Him slide. You have forgotten your first love. New Testament parallel passage:

Rev. 2:3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 *Remember* the height from which you have fallen! *Repent* and *do the things you did* at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.

1. REMEMBER - Restored Relationship (vs. 2:1-8)

In verse 7 Jonah says "I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you". Remembering God's love and responding to it through prayer is the first step in restoring your relationship with God. God stands ready to speak with us always. Jonah's "remembers" the Lord and his prayer is his way of responding to, not initiating, contact with God. Like the Father of the prodigal son God stands always looking down the road waiting for our return. He is ready and willing to accept us home and to forgive us everything wrong we have done.

Jonah ran from God by getting in a ship and going in the opposite direction. This led him to the belly of the whale. Perhaps today you are finding yourself in the belly of a different whale.

E.g. The Taj Mahal in India was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is said that during the construction of the building one day the Emperor was walking through the building site and banged his leg on a large wooden box. He ordered the box be removed because it was a hazard to the construction. It was the coffin with his wife inside – the very reason he started the building in the first place. This may sound crazy but the same happens all the time in our spiritual lives. God saves us and sets us free and we vow to live for Him but somewhere along the way forget and start living for ourselves instead.

The first step is to go to Him in prayer. Remember, God is here and He is listening. Sometimes God has to shake us so hard that only the unshakable remains. There have been times in my life when God has had to shake me hard to get my attention.

2. REPENT - Restored Will (vs. 2:9)

In verse 9 Jonah says "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good." In other words, Jonah is not just setting his heart but his will to follow God.

Along with prayer, repentance is the way to restore your fellowship with God. To repent means to turn around. It is an action word. It is the acknowledgement that you have done wrong and the sincere desire not to repeat it. Like someone going the wrong way down a road sometimes it is necessary to turn around and head back the other way (instead of just going on and hoping everything works out all right). It is not just being sorry over sin - it is setting your will to change your behavior.

A Sunday School teacher once asked a class what was meant by the word "repentance." A little boy put up his hand and said, "It is being sorry for your sins." A little girl also raised her hand and said, "It is being sorry enough to quit."

A cartoon in the Saturday Review of Literature - little George Washington is standing with an axe in his hand in front of the famous cherry tree. He has already admitted his guilt saying that he "cannot tell a lie." His father is standing there beside him exasperated saying, "All right, so you admit it! You always admit it! The question is, when are you going to stop doing it."

True repentance has a double aspect; it looks upon things past with a weeping eye, and upon the future with a watchful eye.

Repentance is a lot more than just saying that you are sorry for your sins.

Quote - Repentance means that I own responsibility for my part in what was unsatisfactory behavior. I accept responsibility for my part in what is and what will be new behavior. Repentance is owning responsibility for what was, accepting responsibility for what is, and acting responsibly now. It is not a matter of punishing ourselves for past mistakes, hating ourselves for past failures, and depressing ourselves with feelings of worthlessness. Repentance is finishing the unfinished business of my past and choosing to live in new ways that will not repeat old unsatisfactory situations. In the full Christian meaning of the Word, repentance is a process. It is a thawing out of rigid lifestyles into a flowing, moving, growing, repenting process.

1John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The word used for confess in the Greek means together and something that is SAID or communicated. Joined these words mean agreement or covenant. When we confess our sins we are agreeing with God about what we have done and the seriousness of our actions. Confessing is much more than just recognizing that you have blown it. It means that you feel the same way about your sin that God feels about it. You AGREE with God about the seriousness of it. Repentance is not just asking forgiveness but it is setting your heart to never do the same thing again. It is turning around or changing course.

Repenting to God means repenting to the people you hurt as well. It is not simply restoring your relationship with God. It also means seeking out the people you have hurt and try to restore your relationship with them as well.

Matthew 5:23-24 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

I believe this is why Jesus says that if you divorce your spouse you should not just run out and marry another person. Repentance means that you reconcile not just with God but also with the person you have wronged.

J. Edwin Orr, a professor of Church history has described the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Welsh Revivals of the nineteenth century. As people sought to be filled with the Spirit, they did all they could to confess their wrong doing and to make restitution. But it unexpectedly created serious problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had stolen all kinds of things, from wheelbarrows to hammers. However, as people sought to be right with God they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge piles of returned tools that several of the yards put up signs that read, "If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, Please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you have taken."

Is there anything in your life that is getting in the way of loving Jesus. It can be something you are doing (which must stop) or it could be something which you have not been doing (which must start).

3. REPEAT - Restored Behavior (vs. 3:1-2)

Chapter 3 begins by saying "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'"

God was giving Jonah a second chance to get it right. Part of repentance is not just a changed heart and changed will, it means a change in behavior. It means going back and starting where you left off.

Falling into sin doesn't condemn anybody, but staying in it does. A man at a fishing dock asked an old fisherman sitting there, "If I were to fall into this water, would I drown?" It was his way of asking how deep the water was. The fisherman had a good answer. "No," he said. "Falling into the water doesn't drown anybody. It's staying under it that does."

Jonah is given a second chance to obey the same command. This is the real test of obedience. God again tells Jonah "go to Nineveh." Don't repent of your sins expecting that God will now take you in a different route. Do what He originally told you to do.

God is the God of second chances. We always have a "second chance" with God. No matter what you did or how many times you did it God will always give you a second chance. God restored Jonah to his original position. Sometimes we think that there are some things which God can never forgive us of but when sin abounds – grace abounds even more.

The result of Jonah finally doing as he was told is that city of Nineveh was saved. Just as sin does not just hurt you but those around you and God - obedience does not just bless you but can bring blessing and salvation to those around you as well as blessing God.

I have seen the license plate "Honk if your love Jesus". There is an even better one that I saw once "Tithe if you love Jesus; any idiot can honk!"

George Truett, who for many years was an effective preacher in Dallas, became a changed man through a terrible misfortune. In his youth he accidentally shot and killed a close friend while hunting. The shock of what he had done weighed heavily upon him, but he refused to let it defeat him. He determined to live for God and endeavored to do the work of two men. People who knew him said that his early experience was one of the reasons he glowed with a passion for the lost and gave himself so unstintingly to God's service.

Have you run from the Lord? Perhaps it is not something you have done as something you have left undone. Is your relationship with God lacking? Is something missing? God stands ready to speak you if you Remember Him. Go Back to Him in prayer. Repent of the things you have done and set your heart not to do it again. Do what the Lord wants you to do. If you do then He will use you as a witness and light.

In the case of Jonah, he got the message and went on to obey God and a city was saved.

In the New Testament passage from Revelations, God warned the church to return but it did not, and the city was lost. Years ago I had the chance to visit the ruins of Ephesus. The river that connected it to the sea was the source of life for the city. When that river dried up, the city died. God tells them to remember, repent and repeat, but then goes on to warn that those who run from him, "I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place."

What does it mean that God will come and remove your lampstand from its place? It can be read to mean that, if we consistently disobey and run from God that we will lose our witness to others. However, it also has another meaning. The lampstand represents the light of Jesus within us, it represents the Holy Spirit.

If we consistently disobey and reject God's will for our lives and do not remember, repent and return, the pull to our conscience from the Holy Spirit is deadened. Our hearts grow calloused to the prompting of the Spirit.

Mark 3:28-29 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. 29 But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

This does not mean that we can ever reach a point in our lives that we are beyond God's forgiveness. It simply means that we can reach a point in our lives when we no longer seek it. The unforgivable sin is not an act, it is a failure to act brought about by continued rejection of God's grace and love.

Where are you at today? Have you run from the Lord? God is giving you a second chance today.

One by one He took them from me all the things I valued most;
'Til I was empty-handed, every glittering toy was lost.
And I walked earth's highways, grieving, in my rags and poverty.
Until I heard His voice inviting, "Lift those empty hands to Me!"
Then I turned my hands toward heaven, and He filled them with a store
Of His own unending riches, 'Till they could contain no more.
And at last I comprehended with my stupid mind, and dull,
That God cannot pour His riches into hands already full.

In his book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*, Max Lucado tells the following story to illustrate God's love, grace and concern for those who are lost. Longing to leave her poor Brazilian neighborhood, Christina wanted to see the world. Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor for a bed, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove, she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother's heart. Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for streetwalkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture--taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

She did.