

Not Just Another Big Fish Story: Jonah 3 – “Running For God”

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Often the second part of the Batman and Robin two-“parter” would begin with the action frozen where we left our hero’s last week, and a brief overview of last week’s episode that led to the critical juncture of life or death. So I’ll do the same: when last we left our (es)caped crusader, he had just been vomited on the sea shore. Following his harrowing attempt to run from God, following his journey overboard to the bottom of hell, following his miraculous rescue into the mouth of a whale, and following his upchucked expulsion from that same whale’s belly; we find our hero, with stinking seaweed still wrapped around his head, with gastric bleached, and pale-white skin; laying completely exhausted; but safe, on the beach. Let’s read what happens next. (read chapter 3)

This morning we will see the circle come full. Jonah tried to run away from God, then ran to God, and now will run for God. Next week, we’ll explore the final episode as Jonah tries to run God! There are three parts to this short chapter, and each of them stands independently in the significance of their meaning, interpretation, and application, but when coupled together, provide the framework for this week’s episode. We better get started or this will become a “two-parter” sermon...and no one would want that.

1. THE SAINT RESTARTS 1-4

Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time...1

What a way to be awakened on the beach after what Jonah had just been through. He may or may not have known why God saved him in and through the great fish, but it became abundantly clear at this moment: God spoke to Jonah, a second time. / Our God is a God of second chances. Our saint, Jonah, gets a restart.

How many of you learned to ride a bicycle the first time you tried? I see no hands. Most of us had loving fathers or mothers or older brothers or sisters who patiently dried our tears of failure or pain; placed us back on the seat, and guided us along, again and again, until we discovered that balancing point that makes riding a bicycle possible. How would it be different after our first attempt ended in the hedge or bushes or in the ditch; and our teacher throws up his/her hands and declares: "what a horrible failure, you'll never learn to ride this bike, I'll go help another." Our parents would never think of doing that, and aren't you glad God doesn't either?

God has never left Jonah, even on his vain attempt to leave God, even on the way to hell and in the pit of the whale's stomach. God never left Jonah, and now comes to call him again...this time something is different. Maybe the pungent seaweed crown acted like smelling salts and brought Jonah to his senses; or more likely, being that close to death brought a new resolve to do whatever God wanted. Either way and anyway, this time was different; Jonah obediently gets up and resumes his original call.

Our God is a God of second chances. Who of us has begun with God and never suffered a sin-full setback? Who of us has begun with God and never experienced a self-indulgent reconsideration? Who of us has begun with God, only to find the going too rough, the path too long, the journey too hard, or the price too high...and we stop...for awhile? I see no hands, but I know most hearts are agreeing. Few of us make it directly from point A to point Death; without some fits and starts, and thankfully some significant number of restarts! God is a God of second chances. And Jonah gets one here. So why are we so put out when a new or young or less experienced believer goes astray, or makes a mistake or fails...for a time – when God is so prone to give us all second (and subsequent) chances?

John Maxwell wrote: “For every possible predicament of humanity, there is a corresponding grace of God. In other words: For every particular human need there is a particular supernatural resource. For every definite problem there is a definite answer. For every hurt there is a cure. For every weakness there is a perfect strength. For every confusion there is guidance. For every person who has ever failed in their past, there is a forgiveness that forgets! God doesn’t hold anything back when you come back to Him.”

God gives Jonah the same calling, with the same message, to the same people, in the same despised city, in the same hated country...but something this time was different...this time...following his second chance...Jonah obediently runs FOR God. And #2:

2. THE SINNERS REPENT 5-8

The people of Nineveh believed God’s message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. 5

Jonah makes his way to Nineveh, doesn’t say how, maybe a giant bird swooped down and picked him up, and deposited him on the outskirts of Nineveh...well, that’s how I would have written the script...the action can’t ever slow down now, we don’t want to lose our audience now; no switching channels while Jonah trudges across miles and miles of desert. Any way, he gets to this large city, the capital, it measures about three days journey around, and 1/3 of the way into the city Jonah begins to shout his prophetic (I didn’t say pathetic) message.

It wasn’t much of a message...in my humble opinion. Not much there to impress his hearers or draw a huge crowd. This city that possibly numbered 125,000 wouldn’t be running to see the bleached white whale rider become preacher, announcing this simple message; *“Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!”*

Maybe he was gone from seminary class the day they covered the 3-point sermon with a poem for effect and an illustration for clarity. 8 simple words, no introduction, no main body with matching sub-points, and no conclusion; just 8, simple... but incredibly powerful and effective words.

It gives you some sense that God had way more to do with the content and delivery and reception of this message than this lack-luster sermon; delivered by this prejudiced prophet, to these horribly wicked people. There must have been something else going on here. (Thank God there is every week, from this pulpit!)

Many years ago, The British Weekly published this provocative letter: Dear Editor Sir: It seems, ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. Well, I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I recently and quite suddenly discovered I can not remember a single sermon. I wonder therefore, if a minister's time might be more profitably spent doing something more worthwhile? Signed; "Unimpressed".

For weeks a storm of editorial responses ensued...finally ended by this letter: Dear Unimpressed: I have been married to the same woman for 30 years. During that time I have eaten approximately 32,850 meals—mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I can not remember the complete menu of a single meal. And yet...I have the distinct impression that without those meals...I would have starved to death long ago. Signed; "Thank a Preacher".

The point is not that Jonah delivered a "home-run" sermon; but that the Ninevites got what GOD had to say, and they began the process of repentance. It gives us all hope that if the Ninevites can repent...anyone can repent! Most of us have someone or some group of people on our little secret lists that we hate, or even hope that they can't or won't repent.

Maybe it's an alcoholic parent, or an abusive spouse or an abortion doctor or a child molester. If these Ninevites can repent from the atrocities they have committed in the name of war, then there is hope for any of us...all of us.

And there are some peculiarities of this repentance. It affected all the people in this large city. This may have been one of the largest mass revivals in human history. I know there have been some amazing revivals in this country during the history of the United States. I know there were revivals in England under John and Charles Wesley. It is said that when the English revival came to the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland that the Spirit of Repentance was so strong that sailors sailing past the island found that they had to pull into port and find a church to confess because the weight of their sin was so great.

I know there was a revival in a small college town in central Kentucky in the late 1960's which lasted through the turning of the decade. I met many of the participants and some of the results of that revival during my time attending seminary in that small college town of Wilmore, KY. In one of my first days on campus I was walking the main hall of the main administration building and I fell under the gaze of a portrait of a white-haired man, whom I did not recognize. Leaving the painting, I felt the gaze of the white haired man follow me as I was unexplainably urged to detour into the small chapel for a time before my next class...which I did. Not until my second year, in a lecture by Dr. Robert Coleman did I learn of the great American revivalist Charles Finney. It was said of him that his presence, his eyes, his stare had caused many to turn from their wicked ways and repent of their sins without him ever uttering a word, or preaching a sermon. The artist who painted that picture of Charles Finney, captured that essence...and I avoided that hallway when ever I could; or I'd have ended up in the chapel every time!

No, it wasn't that Jonah was so great or had preached such a memorable sermon; but the spirit of God, the compassion of God brought a cloud of repentance on that whole city, including her animals and her king; from an 8 word sermon by a reluctant preacher! Before revival there must be repentance...and Nineveh was on her way.

3. THE SOVERIGN RELENTS 9-10

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened. 10

I have chosen the word 'relents' because it fits. Here is its meaning: "To become less rigid or strict, to become more sympathetic or amenable, and to do something previously ruled out or allow something previously forbidden". God relented of the destruction he had planned and warned that Nineveh would receive. In a most interesting twist; this Hebrew word is in some translations defined as "*God repented*" of the evil he was about to do. It is used in the story of the Israelites and the Golden calf. Moses interceded on their behalf as God was about to wipe them out, and "*God repented of the evil he thought to do*" to the Israelites. God changed his mind and didn't carry out the destruction he had threatened.

What does that mean to you, what does it do to your image or impression of God; that He might change his mind? That he might need to "repent" of something, anything? For many of us raised to believe that God is unchanging, that God's perfect knowledge of the future must play out as His perfect knowledge dictates; find it a bit distasteful to have to consider that God can or could or should or might have to change His mind! But apparently for these Ninevites...it's a good thing He can, and does!

It's a good thing for us too! We play so loose and fast with the redemptive effect of the resurrection that we often forget that sin pays its wages; and its wage is death. Were it not for the death and resurrection of Jesus, none of us would stand a chance to be saved, to live a normal or moral life, to be joyfully free from the cares of this world, and have hope for the next!

But because God changed His mind, the people of Ninevah are spared their certain doom; their repentance created God's revival...and they are saved. Because God chose to give His Son to death, and bring Him to new life again; we too can be saved.

One day C. H. Spurgeon was walking through the English countryside with a friend. As they strolled along, the great evangelist noticed a barn with a weather vane on its roof. At the top of the vane were these words: GOD IS LOVE. Spurgeon remarked to his companion that he thought this was a rather inappropriate place for such a message. "Weather vanes are changeable," he said, "but God's love is constant." "I don't agree with you about those words, Charles," replied his friend. "You misunderstood their meaning. That sign is indicating a truth: that regardless of which way the wind blows, God is love, and His love never changes."

God's love is a powerful thing. Thank God that God may on occasion change His mind, but even greater...thank God that God's love never changes. In spite of our past, in spite of our failures, God's love is constant. When we return to God after a time of running from God, we will discover that God's love never changed. When we get a restart, a "do-over" to willfully obey the call of God; we'll be accompanied by the truth, the fact, that God's love never changes. When repentance produces revival; even in some we find unredeemable; it is because God's love never changes. God might change His mind, but God will never change his nature: Love.

Today's episode leaves our hero muted, silent, and probably shocked at this remarkable turn of events. And as we'll see next week, the Ninevites mass repentance that produced God's mass revival...leaves him none to happy! Tune in next week for the final adventure of Jonah: trying to run God!

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