

Going Down, Going Up, Going Forward

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[0 : 00] Well, turn with me in your Bibles, if you would, to the book of Jonah, and we're going to read together Jonah chapter 2. That is page 774, if you have one of our Blue Vistas Bibles.

Otherwise, it's tucked in there at the end of your Old Testament, after Amos and Obadiah, comes Jonah, before Micah and those other little prophets.

And last week we read chapter 1, which tells us the story of how Jonah was told by God to go and preach God's word of warning, of judgment, to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

And Jonah decided he didn't want to do that, and he fled from the Lord. But you can't flee from the Lord, and it all caught up with him. And he was thrown overboard from the ship where he was on. And the last verse of chapter 1 tells us, The Lord hadn't actually abandoned Jonah, but the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow him. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[1 : 08] Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, I call out to the Lord out of my distress.

And he answered me, Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me.

All your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, I'm driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.

The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head. At the roots of the mountains, I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you in your holy temple.

[2 : 17] Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed, I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Mysterious ways indeed. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, last week we found a disobedient Jonah on the run and under siege from God.

Jonah was a walking contradiction, claiming that he feared God, yet disobeying him in the exact same episode. He was an inconsistent and selfish man who had picked a fight with a God who simply was not to be messed with.

And God's plan was to knock him down a few pegs in order to make him useful again. And we recognize that we are very much like Jonah, even though we didn't really like admitting it.

[3 : 50] And recognize that God would do the same with us if he had to. Well, this week we get an insight into what that knocking down to build back up process looks like, and what it did look like for Jonah.

And by looking at his experience, we can hopefully see God's grace and kindness in the process more clearly, both to Jonah and to us.

But here in chapter 2, we get to read the prayer that Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish, as verse 1 tells us. And that prayer really comes in two parts.

First of all, Jonah recounts his drowning experience and his great rescue, up until verse 7. And then the last few verses, we get his response to that experience.

In verse 2, Jonah kind of pins up the headline for us. We know before he even gets started, that this is a prayer about distress and deliverance.

[5 : 00] For repeated twice in this first verse is the notion that Jonah cried out in despair, but yet God heard him and God answered him. We know from the very off that the outcome is going to be good.

And Jonah could have perhaps just stopped there, couldn't he? That could have been all that Jonah decided to write for us, and he could have just skipped on to verse 10. Chapter 2 could have read something like this.

But it doesn't read that way, does it? Because Jonah wants us to experience his experience in full technical error, so that we will be amazed at our God, like he was amazed at his God, and learn the lessons that he must have learnt, reflecting back on this prayer that he had said in the belly of the fish.

This passage, I think, separates into three simple episodes. The first part is going down, which is looking at Jonah's drowning experience.

The second part, going back up, the rescue. And the final part, going forward, Jonah's resolution in light of what has happened to him.

[6 : 21] So let's focus on the going down, first of all. And our first point for today is going down, God disciplines the remorseless. We'll be looking at verses 3 to about halfway through verse 6.

The first thing Jonah wants us to learn is how terrifying it is to be under God's judgment and discipline. Jonah is left without a shadow of a doubt as to why he has found himself hurled overboard.

Whatever we make of Jonah's motives in chapter 1, in getting thrown into sea doesn't really matter. Jonah might have had enough and thought that by throwing himself overboard, or getting himself thrown overboard, he could put an end to his part in God's plan.

Or perhaps he maybe genuinely recognised that he was deserving of death for the sin he'd committed. We just do not know for certain. And to be honest, it doesn't really matter a whole lot. Neither does it matter that in verse 15 of chapter 1 that the sailors are accredited in throwing Jonah overboard. For in verse 3 of chapter 2, Jonah is fully aware that God was behind it all.

[7 : 36] Jonah and the sailors may have had some part to play in it, but God was the one who made sure that it happened. Whether he threw himself overboard, or the sailors threw him over, or the storm had capsized the boat, the result was all going to be the same in the end.

Jonah was going to find himself up to his neck in high water because God was disciplining him. And that discipline was absolutely terrifying, wasn't it?

Notice how the danger and terror amplifies as Jonah sinks deeper and deeper into the sea in these first few verses. In verse 4, Jonah is just about managing to keep tread water at the surface. God has cast him into the sea, but he is still near the surface, struggling to catch his breath as waves and billows pass over him. Now, I imagine most of us will have some kind of childhood memory of being out at sea, and the wave's been far too big for us, and struggling to keep our head above the surface.

You try to draw a breath just to have it robbed from you as another wave crashes in your face. It's extremely, extremely scary and very unsettling if you ever find yourself in that situation.

[9 : 00] But at least you're still near the surface. Now, imagine how much more frightening it must be when your energies are finally spent and you find yourself powerlessly drifting towards the bottom of the sea as the world slowly gets darker and quieter all around you.

That was Jonah's experience in verse 5 and 6. The water fully closes over him and fully engulfs him, and he plummets down towards the seabed.

And there it seems like the seaweed itself reaches out and grabs him and begins to squeeze the last morsel of life out of his neck. And there he accepts that this is the end and it feels like even the gates of the underworld themselves are opening up to welcome him inside as his lungs begin to slowly fill with salty water.

Well, you put yourself in his situation, does it not make the hairs on your neck stand up and your knuckles become slightly whitened?

Jonah wants to paint his drowning experience in the most chilling light possible. That's why he uses so much poetry, because he wants us to see how scary it is to be under God's judgment and discipline.

[10 : 23] Last week we talked about God being willing to send storms and bring you to the point of sinking if he has to. But he will go even further than that according to chapter 2.

He will bring you to the point of asphyxiation in order to soften your calloused heart if he has to. Now, you may have noticed that there has been no mention of repentance all the way through this first section.

And I think that is because Jonah is absolutely remorseless for his actions up until this point, up until the point where his chest begins to fill with water.

Sometimes God has to bring us that far down before we finally submit to his good purposes and his kind will. And this isn't just true of the God of the Old Testament as some people might think.

Our God hasn't changed one bit. He's just as intense today as he was back then. In 1 Corinthians, some members of the church started to fall ill and some even died because of the sin they were committing against one another.

[11 : 38] God is as radical today about disciplining sin as he was back then. So God is dead set on judging sin.

So what hope then we have as sinners? What hope did Jonah have? Well, perhaps you've noticed we've glossed over verse 4 so far. There is a glimmer of hope.

As Jonah is driven away from God's sight to the bottom of the ocean, he makes a staggering statement. Yet I shall look upon your holy temple.

He is absolutely sure that he is not cut off completely and that there is still hope for him. Now, it's unclear whether he is confident that God is going to rescue him.

I doubt he thought a fish was going to come but it might well be that he thought rescue was coming and as a result he was confident he might be able to get back to Israel and worship in the temple once more.

[12 : 43] Or it could be that he knows even in the darkest of judgments, death itself, he is not beyond the pale. Despite his sin, he knows his God's character.

We see his character very clearly in chapter 4 verse 2. God is gracious and merciful. He is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and longs to relent from disaster.

So no matter what Jonah has done, his sin cannot separate him from a God like that who he knows and who he has trusted in.

And I suspect it's the latter of the two. And this remains true for Israel as well. Like we mentioned last week, an even more terrifying judgment was coming Israel's way.

Even more frightening than Jonah's drowning experience, the Assyrians would soon be amassing on the horizon to ravage and destroy all that had life in Israel.

[13 : 51] But there was still hope. God will bludgeon his remorseless people who carry on proudly in their sin.

But in the judgment, there is still grace. The hope is that they will finally see sense and when they do, God will be waiting, ready, ready to relent, ready to rescue.

And even for those who lost their lives in that invasion 20 to 30 years down the timeline in Israel, no matter how wrapped up in their sin they were, they could have hope beyond the grave if they truly believed in their God and knew him.

So Jonah writes this to warn the people of Israel that they might repent before such a terrible judgment comes to pass, but also to bring great comfort to those true believers who were wrapped up in Israel's sin and wrapped up in the judgment and to remind them that hope still remained.

And for us today, well, God might bring us through something just as devastating though we don't think he will. Perhaps even take his life from our lungs because of our impenitent hearts.

[15 : 11] And this should shock us and horrify so that we might want to do anything we can to avoid it. But it also reminds us that there is hope no matter how distant from God we find ourselves.

Even when it feels that we have sunk to the very bottom of the sea and all chance of reconciliation has gone. God is waiting. God is eager to relent and God is longing to show grace to his people once again.

And that leads us on to our second point for this evening. Going up, God delivers the repentant. Looking at the second half of verse 6 and verse 7.

We reach a turning point in the second half of verse 6 when we meet a wonderful, wonderful word. Yet, despite all the gleam and darkness that we have encountered, Jonah was right to hold out on hope.

For God brought up Jonah's life from the pit. Now, there's still no explicit mention of repentance in this section either.

[16:21] The closest we get to it is that Jonah remembered and that he prayed in verse 7. And this is in addition to what he's already said in verse 1, that he called out and he cried.

Therefore, I don't think this prayer really is an exemplary prayer by any means. It's not to be used as an example of how to repent perfectly. As we'll see in a minute, there's evidence to suggest Jonah's repentance is far from complete and a tad short-sighted.

But we'll look at that when we get to verses 8 and 9. But at least Jonah does pray and he throws himself on God's mercy and God does honor his prayer, doesn't he, by sending the fish, however imperfectly he's done it.

And I think the point is that God's grace is far more complete and far more robust than our repentance can ever be.

God is waiting to relent and show mercy and will do so at even a flicker of repentance. He longs to restore and deliver and he hopes that will be the outcome of his discipline sin rather than the person becoming resentful of him and becoming bitter and turning in on themselves.

[17:48] So Jonah is really I think showing Israel what God's heart is for them. He wants them to call out to him however imperfectly they do it.

The repentance does not have to be perfect. But how can it be? Nobody is perfect and however resolved we are not to sin again we know that eventually we will.

God wants them to throw themselves on his mercy rather than shake their fists at him when his judgment finally comes. And we all know people like that don't we?

Who do shake their fists at him. I've certainly been that way myself once upon a time and am still prone to it now and then. They feel that they've got a bad lot in life and that God is just cruel and malevolent and all he wants to do is cause them harm.

But that couldn't be further than the truth according to Jonah. No, God is kind and gracious and wanting to relent according to chapter four. But sometimes extreme measures are needed, need to be resorted to in order to crack a cold human heart.

[19:04] God's discipline is a mercy. But often we don't see it like that, do we? We just focus on the hardship and want nothing to do with a God who could do something like this to us.

Well, we need to be careful, I think, not to become spiteful and resentful of God when he disciplines us. Because after all, is it not our sin that has provoked him?

We're not squeaky clean, though we would make ourselves out to be so. We are responsible for the discipline that we face, yet God is kindly using that discipline with the hope of delivering us.

Furthermore, does God not have the right to do as he wishes with his creation? We see that theme come up again and again in the book of Jonah. He appoints a storm in chapter one and a fish as well to do his will.

And when we get to chapter four, he's going to appoint a plant to do his will as well. But we simply recoil, don't we, at the thought that God could do whatever he wants with us, his creation.

[20:20] As Isaiah wrote, what right does the clay have to talk back to the potter? The creator has every right to govern his creation and thankfully he governs it to restore and to redeem rather than to cripple and destroy though we'd make him out to be that way.

So let's not be a church that shakes our fists at God when discipline comes our way, but rather a church that bows the knee. And the good news is that as long as there is life in our lungs, it is never too late to bow the knee.

Jonah felt as far away from God as possible but God heard his cry nonetheless. So if you do feel tonight like you are just too far gone, so far down in the depths that God could never make use of you ever again, remember Jonah and be encouraged.

Jonah was as far gone as we can possibly imagine and yet God delivered him and made him useful for his kingdom once again and he can do the exact same things with us no matter how steeped in sin we are.

So we've gone down and we've seen the terror of God's judgment and we've gone up seeing God's amazing grace in delivering people. Now let's go forward.

[21:53] Our final point for tonight then is going forward God develops the resolved. Here in verse 8 onwards we move on from Jonah recounting his drowning and deliverance experience to seeing how he responds in light of it.

And at first glance Jonah seems like a completely different man from who he was in chapter 1. He is absolutely resolute to serve the Lord and make things right.

He says that he will lift up his voice in thanksgiving make sacrifice and pay the vows that he has vowed to pay presumably meaning he's willing to go to Nineveh eventually. And then he finishes with this amazing emphatic cry salvation belongs to the Lord. It all sounds very noble and he sounds completely renewed. And I think at this point Jonah generally has learnt some lessons.

He's ready to make sacrifice because I think he's began to recognise his sin thanks to the drowning experience though he doesn't mention his sin at any point during this prayer.

[23 : 07] And we see in chapter 3 that he does indeed pay the vows that he vows to pay. He does actually go to Nineveh. So there are signs that he is changing. But I think there are also some signs that suggest that he has a long way to go before he becomes the perfect prophet.

Which will be confirmed when we get to chapter 4 when he has the mother of all tantrums. So what signs are there that he might not have learnt all of his lessons just yet?

Well, look at verse 8. He still seems to have this somewhat of an us and them mindset, doesn't he? He states those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

He has the pagans in view and he certainly thinks that he is above them. And yet the pagans in this book are the sailors who we've met already and the Ninevites who we're just about to meet in chapter 3.

And they well and truly showed Jonah up at every single meeting. These idolaters did experience God's steadfast love.

[24 : 23] There was hope for them. They weren't too sullied or too far gone. But Jonah thought that they were. But they were not like him.

Now, I have no doubt that Jonah wasn't involved in idolatry like the pagans were. I think he was probably a very sanctimonious and pious man. And he no doubt kept his hands very clean.

But in this book, Jonah's repentance is no more thorough than that of the pagans. For he reacts exactly the same as the sailors did in chapter 1 by making vows and sacrifices.

In fact, he's just a bit slower out the blocks. Takes them to the end of chapter 2 to say that whether sailors are ahead of him in chapter 1. And he doesn't recognize, I think, that he, although he is not carving out images out of stone or wood or gold and bowing down to them, he is engaged in a different kind of idolatry.

He is a man who would rather have God in his own image, a God slightly less gracious, less kind, and only interested in Israel.

[25 : 40] He would rather worship a God like that than the true God he's met with. All through the book of Jonah, Jonah is shown to be no more deserving of God's grace than the pagans.

So I don't think he's quite learnt all of his lessons yet. And he certainly doesn't seem to have come to terms with this when we get to chapter 4, when he becomes absolutely enraged with God for showing grace to the pagans, the Ninevites, who he thinks are undeserving.

But the great thing is, God didn't need Jonah to have learnt the full lesson to start working in him and using him. For now, he had learnt enough to start moving forward.

It's a bit like, I think, when you have to tell a child off because they're refusing to do something.

Now, I remember when I was a young boy refusing to get in the car to go to family friends.

The reason behind not wanting to go to my family friends was because I didn't want to play with their son, who I found rather annoying, and in all honesty smelt like urine.

[26 : 56] So, needless to say, my parents were not very happy with this. And my trousers were down before I knew it. I had a red bottom, and I was looking rather sulky in the car.

I'd learnt my lesson at that point that there's no way I was going to get away from my parents. They were going to have their way no matter what. But in the car, I asked my mum, I said, well, I'm in the car, I'm coming, but do I really have to play with this boy?

And she said, in true mum fashion, we'll see when we get there. It's a classic move. Needless to say, when I got there, I was sold up the river by my mum and I was playing Lego with this unhygienic boy who I found rather annoying.

And I remember in that moment screaming at my mum in absolute fury, saying, I knew you'd do this. You always do this. I should never have got in the car.

Needless to say, I was a delight of a child. Well, I think we see that similar kind of sulky behaviour in Jonah. And that sulky child, I think, also hides in all of us to some degree, though we might have outgrown him somewhat.

[28 : 13] Jonah has learnt enough of his lesson from his drowning experience. God is not to be messed with. He's had his good smacking, and he's in the car.

And he's now moving in the right direction, heading to Nineveh. But needless to say, he is not fully on board with the endeavour. But thankfully, Jonah's resolve was enough.

No matter how short-sighted he was, God could start developing him and he could learn the rest of his lessons further down the line. So for now, Jonah was ready to be vomited up on the seashore, and pointed in the direction of Nineveh.

How do you think Jonah's first audience would have responded to these verses of Jonah in verses 8 to 10? Well, I think they would have agreed with absolutely everything that Jonah says here.

It all sounds very orthodox, doesn't it, what Jonah says, and very, very religious. And he even gets a few digs in at the pagans in the process. So what's not to like? Well, I imagine they would have responded much like the Americans did when Kara and I went to see a country music festival in Nashville.

[29 : 37] Every time the word God, or Bible, or gun, or redneck was mentioned, people were out of their seats, hands in the air, amening, and claiming it for themselves.

And I suspect the 8th century Israelites were much the same when they heard these words of Jonah. But I don't think Jonah's intention in writing was to get the Israelites on his side and in agreement with him.

I think he is subversively getting under their skins. For there are a couple of throwbacks in this chapter back to life in Israel.

You might have noticed that the temple has got a mention twice in this chapter in both verse 4 and verse 7. And the mention of idols surely would hark the Israelites' minds back to the whopping two golden calves sat on the hills in Israel where they went to worship instead of going to the temple.

Now I don't think that's a coincidence. I think that Jonah wants to remind the Israelites of their sin so that they might come to a point of resolution like he did.

[30 : 55] He wants them to twig when reading these words that they aren't worshipping God rightly either just like the pagans weren't and they need to repent like the sailors did and like the Ninevites are just about to in chapter 3.

Then and only then with proper repentance could God start to use them positively in his redemptive plan. But sadly there's little evidence that that ever happened.

And as for us well I think this statement of resolve of Jonah's reminds us that God can develop us even if our repentance is not perfect.

As long as we have some resolve to obey him God can work in us. for we are a work in progress and none of us can repent perfectly because we are all imperfect beings are we not?

And we all fail to keep the resolutions that we make. I mean how many times have we sinned profoundly and then bowed to God never ever to do that again only to find ourselves doing the exact same thing the following week.

[32 : 05] We feel like we're caught up in a loop cycle that we just simply cannot escape. What matters to God is not perfect repentance but sincere resolve.

Humbly crying out for him to help and however short-sighted or misguided we are to resolve to obey him even though we know we're likely to fail him again. And I think that's a great encouragement.

It certainly is a great encouragement to me. I often picture God as being utterly fed up with me at the end of his tether and utterly disappointed with my feeble efforts.

But in reality he is the exact opposite. He's exactly like he's described in chapter 4 verse 2. He's gracious and merciful.

He's loving and longing to relent. He is chomping at the bit at just a flicker of repentance and resolve that he might forgive us, transform us more into his likeness and get us on board with what is important to him here in this world.

[33 : 20] So it's been a bit of a rollercoaster this evening. A lot of going down, going up, going forward. But hopefully by going through Jonah's rollercoaster experience of his time in the sea and in the fish, we have seen just how terrible it is to come under God's judgment and also how wonderful God's grace is and his readiness to pluck us up from the depths.

And hopefully we have seen sheer kindness of God in choosing to work in us of all people, imperfect and flawed, even though he knows there's a tantrum coming around the corner.

Let me pray for us. Father God, we thank you that you are a kind and gracious God who cares for us enough to discipline us.

And we pray that we would respond rightly to your discipline when it comes our way. We pray also for those who do shake their fists at you rather than bow the knee.

We pray that they would come to see you as you truly are, a merciful and loving God. And we confess, Father, that our attitudes are often so perverse and our motives very mixed.

[34 : 48] But we thank you that you continue to work in us. Make us a useful people here in Glasgow, we pray. in Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen.