

Going Down, Going Up, Going Forward

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[0:00] Well, good evening, good afternoon everyone even. Sorry, I gave a few of you a fright there, I think. Welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk. If you are a visitor, then you're especially welcome.

And if you do have time at the end, it'd be great to hang around so we get to know you a little bit better. I'm just going to start by reading our Bible passage for today, and you'll find that in Jonah chapter 2.

Which, if you have one of these blue Bibles, you'll find on page 774. So let me just fill you in quickly what's happened last week as you turn that up.

Last week, we found that Jonah had been given a call by God to go to the city of Nineveh to preach judgment upon it. But Jonah wanted nothing to do with it.

And we left at verse 17 last week.

[1:05] And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And here in chapter 2, we get Jonah's prayer.

So let me read from verse 1. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, I called 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 am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me.

Weeds were wrapped around 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.

[2:09] When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord. And my prayer came to you into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with a 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. Well, like I said, last week we found Jonah on the run and under siege from God. Jonah had picked a fight with a God who was not to be messed with.

A God who would knock him down if needed in order to build him back up again. And if you were here last week, we also recognized that we were very much like Jonah, though we hate to admit it. And recognized that God would do the same to us if he needed to in order to bring us to a point of repentance. Well, this week we get an insight into what that knocking down to build back up again process looked like for Jonah.

[3:24] Jonah pins up the headline for us in verse 2. We know before he even gets started that this is a prayer about distress and deliverance.

For repeated twice in these first two verses is the notion that Jonah cried out in despair. But God heard and God answered. We know from the very off that the outcome is going to be good.

God's discipline would bring about the intended repentance in Jonah. And while Jonah could have stopped there, couldn't he? That could have been all that Jonah had given us.

And he could have quite happily skipped on to verse 10. Chapter 2 could have gone something a bit like this. I called, God answered, and the fish vomited me back up.

But it doesn't because Jonah wants us to experience that process in full technicolor. So that we recognize just how awful it is to fall under God's judgment and discipline.

[4:30] But he also wants us to be amazed at our gracious God who bears with us. Even though we are so blatantly disobedient some of the time. I think this passage separates into three simple episodes.

Going down, which is Jonah's drowning experience. Going up, which is Jonah's rescue and deliverance. And going forward, Jonah's resolution in light of what has happened to him.

So let's focus on the going down first of all. And our first point for today is then, going down, God disciplines the remorseless. Looking at verses 3 to halfway through verse 6.

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

Verse 3. Jonah and the sailors may have had a part to play. But God was the one who made sure Jonah ended up in the stormy sea. God cast him into the deep.

[5:44] God was disciplining him because he was unrepentant for his sin. But you may have noticed that there has been no mention of repentance all the way through this first section of chapter 2.

And I think that's because Jonah is absolutely remorseless up until the point his lungs begin to fill with salty seawater. He's remorseless and that is why God disciplines him.

And this discipline was absolutely terrifying. Notice how the danger and the terror amplifies as Jonah sinks deeper and deeper into the sea.

In verse 4, Jonah is just about managing to tread water and stay at the surface as the waves and the billows pass over his head.

But it isn't long before his energies fail and he begins to sink. Look at verses 5 and 6. Does it not make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up on end?

[7:09] 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.

He will bring us to the point of asphyxiation in order to soften our callous and impenitent hearts. Sometimes God has to bring us that far down before we finally submit to his good and kind will for our lives.

And this isn't just true of the God of the Old Testament. Our God hasn't changed one bit. He is just as intense today as he was back then.

In 1 Corinthians, some members of the church were even falling ill and dying as a result of their unrepentant sin. God is as radical today about disciplining sin as he was back then in Jonah's day. Well, you might be thinking this sounds very scary and very bleak. But there is purpose behind the judgment and therefore there is hope for us. Perhaps you noticed that we have glossed over verse 4.

[8:24] As Jonah is driven away from God's sight to the very bottom of the ocean, he makes a very staggering statement. Yet I shall look upon your temple.

He is sure that he is not cut off completely and that there is still hope for him. Jonah knows that even in the darkest of judgments, death itself is closing on him.

He is not beyond the pale. Despite his sin, he knows the character of his God. As we see in chapter 4 verse 2.

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and longs to relent from disaster. There is always hope for us.

There is always hope with a God like that. And this remained true for Israel as well, Jonah's initial hearers of this book. Like we mentioned last week, an even more terrifying judgment was coming Israel's way.

[9:33] Even more frightening than Jonah's drowning experience. The Assyrians would soon be amassing on the horizon. God would bludgeon his remorseless people if needed, who carried on proudly in their sin.

But in that judgment, there was grace. The hope was that the people of Israel would finally see sense. And when they did, God would be waiting to relent and to rescue.

Just like he did with Jonah. And for us today, well, God might bring us through something just as devastating because of our impenitent hearts.

And this should shock us and horrify us so that we might do all that we can in order to avoid it. But it also reminds us that there is hope for us no matter how distant from God we find ourselves. Even when it feels like we have sunk to the very bottom and all chance of reconciliation has gone. God is still waiting, eager to relent and longing to show grace to us.

[10:45] And that leads us on to our second point this afternoon. 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 word. Yet.

Despite all the gleaming and darkness, all the judgment and discipline that we've encountered so far, Jonah was right to hold out on hope. For God brought up Jonah's life from the pit.

He answered him. There is still no explicit mention of repentance in this section. The closest we get to it is that Jonah remembered the Lord.

And that he prayed in verse 7. And this is in addition to Jonah's comments in verse 1. That he called out and he cried to the Lord. But as a result, I don't think this prayer is by any means exemplary.

[11:47] It's not to be used as an example of how to repent. But as we'll see in a minute, there's evidence to suggest that Jonah's repentance was far from complete.

And is a tad short-sighted. But we'll look at that when we get to verses 8 and 9. But at least Jonah does pray. He throws himself on the mercy of God.

And God does honour his cry for help by sending the fish. And the point is that God's grace is far more complete and 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 to deliver.

And he hopes that will be the outcome of his discipline. Rather than us becoming resentful of him. So Jonah is showing Israel what God's heart is for them.

[12:50] He wants them to call out to him. The repentance doesn't have to be perfect. For Jonah's wasn't perfect. But how can it be? Nobody is perfect.

And however resolved we are not to sin again. We know that we will inevitably will. God wants them just to throw themselves on his mercy. Rather than shake their fists at him when his judgment comes.

For we all know people who do shake their fists at God, don't we? And sometimes, if we're honest, we do the same.

We feel like we've been given a bad lot in life. And that God is cruel and malevolent for doing so. But that couldn't be farther from the case.

Sometimes, extreme measures need to be resorted to in order to crack a cold human heart. God's discipline is a mercy in disguise.

[13:50] But they don't see it that way. And sometimes we don't either. They just focus on the hardship and want nothing to do with a God who could do this to them.

But when we're thinking this way, and when other people are thinking this way, we must remember that it is our sin that has provoked God. We like to make ourselves out as if we're squeaky clean and that God has just been harsh with us.

But we are responsible for the discipline that we face. We are to blame, not God. And furthermore, does God not have the right to do with us as he pleases?

Does God not have the right to do with his creation as he wishes? We see this theme come up again and again in the book of Jonah. He appoints a storm to do his will and a fish to do his will in chapter 1.

And when we get to chapter 4, he'll appoint a plant to do his will and a worm to do his will. But we recoil, don't we, at the thought that God could do whatever he wants with us to do his will.

[14:54] As Isaiah wrote, what right has the clay to talk back to the potter? The creator has every right to govern his creation as he pleases, including us humans.

And mercifully, he governs it to restore and to redeem, rather than to cripple and destroy, which would be exactly what we deserve. So let's not shake our fists at him, but rather bow our knees. For God delivers the repentance. Let's see God's discipline as a pathway towards repentance and deliverance, not as a cruelty.

And the good news is that as long as there is still life in our lungs, just a mortal like Jonah, it is never too late to bow the knee.

Jonah felt as far from God as physically possible, but God heard his cry nonetheless. And as a result, God did deliver him and made him useful for his kingdom again.

[16:02] And he can do that with you too. So we've gone down and we've seen a terror of God's judgment. And we've gone up and seen God's amazing grace to pluck people like us back up.

Let's now go forward. A final point for today then. Going forward, God develops the resolved. Here in verse 8 onwards, we move on from Jonah recounting his drowning experience and deliverance to seeing how he responds in light of all that has happened to him.

And at first glance, Jonah seems to be a completely different man. 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 what he has vowed to pay. Presumably meaning that he's now ready to go to Nineveh.

And then to finish it off, he finishes with this emphatic cry. Salvation belongs to the Lord. It all sounds very noble, doesn't it? And I think at this point in the narrative, Jonah generally has learned something.

[17:21] But I think there are also signs that he has far to go before he becomes the perfect prophet, which will be confirmed when we get to chapter 4 when we see the mother of all tantrums from Jonah.

So what signs are there that he might not have learnt his lesson fully? Well, take a look at verse 8. He still seems to have somewhat of an us and them kind of mindset.

He states that 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, doesn't he?

And yet the pagans in this book are the sailors that we met last week and the Ninevites that we'll meet next week who show him up at every single meeting.

These idolaters that Jonah is talking about did experience God's steadfast love. There was hope for them. They weren't too sullied or too far gone.

[18:28] But Jonah thinks that they are because they are not like him. And Jonah didn't recognise either that he was involved in a kind of idolatry himself, trying to make God in his own image less gracious than he truly is and only interested in his special people who Jonah thought was worthy.

Jonah is shown to be no more deserving of God's grace than the pagans. So Jonah still has some way to go. But God didn't need Jonah to have learnt his lesson fully, to start working in him and using him.

For he learnt enough to start moving forward. It's a bit like when you have to tell a child off because they're refusing to do something. I remember my parents having to tell me off when I was a little boy because I was refusing to get in the car to go to one of our family friends' house.

My reasoning was I didn't want to play with one of the boys who I knew was going to be there because I thought he was annoying and he smelled pretty bad too. Well, a good smack was enough to get me back in the car and I was well on my way.

But I sulked all of the way there. I hadn't fully learnt my lesson. But I was on my way. Well, I think we see that similar sulky small child in Jonah who also hides in us if we're honest.

[20:08] Jonah has learnt enough of his lesson from his drowning experience God is not to be messed with. He's going to get his way no matter what. He's had a good smacking.

And he is now moving in the right direction, heading to Nineveh. But I don't think his heart is quite fully in it yet, as we'll see when we get to chapter 4.

But Jonah's resolve was enough. No matter how short-sighted he was, God could start developing him into someone useful for his kingdom.

And he could learn the rest of the lessons further down the line. So for now, Jonah was ready to be vomited up on the seashore and pointed in a direction of Nineveh.

Verse 10. How do you think Jonah's first audience would have responded to these couple of verses? Well, I think they would have agreed with absolutely everything Jonah has said.

[21:09] It all sounds very religious what Jonah said, doesn't it? And very orthodox. And he even gets a few digs in at the pagans. So what's not to like if you're an Israelite?

But I don't think Jonah's intention in writing was to get the Israelites in agreement with him. I think he's trying to get under their skins.

For there are a couple of throwbacks to life back home in Israel in this prayer. You might have noticed them as we went along. The temple has been mentioned twice.

In verse 4 and verse 7. And there's a mention of idols. Now surely that would hark the Israelites' mind back to the whopping two golden calves that are sat in the middle of Israel that they have been going to to worship instead of crossing the border to go to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Now I don't think that this is a coincidence. I think that Jonah wants to remind Israel of their sin so that they might repent and be resolved to obey God finally.

[22:18] And that resolve will no doubt be flawed and short-sighted like Jonah's was. But it is, no matter what, enough for God to start using them positively in his redemptive plan again.

And as for us, well, I think the statement of resolve of Jonah's reminds us that God can develop us too, even if our repentance isn't perfect.

For we are all a work in progress. None of us can repent perfectly because we are imperfect beings. And we will all fail to keep the resolutions that we make.

I mean, how many times have we sinned profoundly and then vowed never, ever to do it again, only to find ourselves caught up in the same kind of sin the following week.

But what matters to God is not perfect repentance, but sincere resolve. And I think that is a great encouragement.

[23:23] For I often think, picture God as utterly fed up with me, at the end of his tether and utterly disappointed with my feeble efforts. But in reality, he's exactly how he's described in chapter 4.

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

Well, it's been a bit of a rollercoaster this afternoon. We've gone down and up and forward. But hopefully by going through Jonah's rollercoaster experience, we've seen just how terrible God's discipline can be.

But also how wonderfully merciful it can be and gracious that God would use it to pluck us back up and bring us to a point of repentance and make us useful in his kingdom again.

And just how forbearing God is with us too, that he chooses to use us, these flawed works in progress, even though he knows there might be a tantrum just around the corner.

[24:46] Let me pray for us. Father God, we thank you that you are so kind and so gracious with us and that you care for us enough to discipline us.

And we pray that we would respond rightly to your discipline when it comes. We pray 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.

But we thank you that you continue to work in us. Make us a useful people for your kingdom, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.