

God's Second Chance

From the series, *Jonah: The Great Adventure*

Jonah 3:1-10

By Dr. David H. McKinley

Have you ever wished or wanted to have a do-over in life? ... to hit the reset button and go back to where you were before? Maybe it was in golf; we call it a mulligan. It's the opportunity to hit a second shot once you've made a mess of the first shot. Golfers—especially nonprofessionals—are always happy to start the first tee with a mulligan.

Maybe for you, the do-over is where you chose to go on vacation. You traveled to a place people told you about only to be unimpressed once you got there. It didn't live up to expectations.

Maybe it was a restaurant or a meal of some kind. Maybe it was something much more important — like a conversation you had with a mate or with a child or with your boss—and the result was something you wish you could do-over because of the damage, injury, and conflict that came out of that conversation. Maybe you're still living with regret today.

Maybe it was choosing a major in college—one you wish you could go back and do over given the amount of time and money you put into it. Maybe it was a job you took, and you realized, *I've got the job, but I don't want the career.*

Maybe your do-over relates to buying a home or buying a car.

If you make public presentations like I do, there have been many, many times when I wish I could start a sermon over or do it again. In fact, I've kind of been having some regret about my message series title for the book of Jonah. I've titled it "The Great Adventure," but I wish I had called it "The Great Misadventure." I think that title is a better description given the reality of Jonah's story.

However, I'm guessing we all have moments when we wish we could have do-overs because second chances are important! The best way I know how to do it say it is *sometimes mulligans matter!*

Let me give you a quick gallery of people whose "mulligan" mattered:

- Albert Einstein was said to have not spoken until four and did not read until he was seven.
- Thomas Edison was said to be too stupid to learn anything when he was young.

- Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. How would you like to be the coach who cut Jordan?
- For decades, Babe Ruth held the home run record, but he also held the record for the most strikeouts in baseball history until recently.
- Walt Disney was fired from his first job as a newspaper artist because “he lacked creativity.”
- Henry Ford’s early businesses failed; he was broke five times.
- 27 different publishers rejected Dr. Seuss’ first book.
- Vincent van Gogh sold only one painting during his lifetime. And today, his paintings are worth millions of dollars.

Human perseverance, patience, and persistence can pay off, and sometimes people help to create their own second chances. But I’m also thankful to very clearly and thankfully say, *God is a God of second chances!* Far beyond the patience, perseverance, and persistence of our own human will is the amazing promise in the Word of God that He is a God who takes people and gives them the opportunity to begin again. God provides do-over restarts in life!

As we look at the life of Jonah, the fugitive prophet, we now come to a point in the story where we see God giving Jonah a do-over.

Last week, we left Jonah on the shore. The Bible simply described it this way: *the Lord spoke to the fish and the fish vomited Jonah out on dry land.* So we ended last week with this graphic picture. There was a prayer from the belly of the fish that ended with a “burp” instead of an “amen.” The fish threw up Jonah onto the shore, and that’s where we left him. And today we step into Jonah 3:

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.’

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:1-10).

Jonah came a long way from the belly of the fish to this big, incredible revival that happened in the city of Nineveh. It's an amazing story of how God took a man who was wayward and willful, and frankly, a man who was defiant, turned him around, and sent him back to the place of God's intent for His grace and glory.

As we look at Jonah 3, I want us to break it down and look at it in several different ways to get our hearts and hands around this passage of Scripture.

1. The Renewed Commission

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah **the second time**" (Jonah 3:1, *emphasis added*).

"By paralleling here the book's opening remarks, almost word for word, the author skillfully conveys the idea that Jonah is being offered a new beginning." —Archibald Alexander

That's right! If you go back to Jonah 1:2, it simply says,

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh'" (Jonah 1:1-2a).

That's how the entire book started. And here in Jonah 3, it's almost as if we have an exact word-for-word repeat as God recommissions this man and calls him. The good news is that not only did God renew, reclaim, and ultimately, recommission and use Jonah, God will also do that for you!

Our God is a God who ultimately moves to reclaim, renew, and reassign our lives beyond our waywardness and beyond our brokenness. God uses people! And we don't have to be defined by those moments of faithlessness and foolishness in our lives.

One of the most amazing chapters in the Bible is Hebrews 11. It's a chapter that verse after verse after verse begins with these two words: *by faith... by faith... by faith*. Then after *by faith*, there's a name. Some of these names include Abraham, Moses, Samson, David, Jonah, Peter, Rahab, Woman at the Well, John Mark—all considered to be men and women of faith. But the truth is every one of them failed at some point in their lives, at the point of *their faith*. Every one of them were "faith failures."

And yet, God said *these are men and women who lived their lives by faith*. That's because God specializes in meeting us at the place of our failure.

I love these words by Dr. David Jeremiah, marvelous author, Bible teacher, preacher, and one of the great blessings to my life and my generation of ministry:

"Not only was Jonah restored to fellowship with God, but he went on to preach one of the greatest revivals the world has ever known. God specializes in reaching out to us in the midst of our own failure, for He knows that we are dust, and He knows we are frail. And while He never condones our disobedience and rebellion, throughout the Bible we see God giving His saints second chances."
—Dr. David Jeremiah

God takes a wayward prophet, restores him, recommissions him, and then uses him to fulfill His purpose. And now Jonah obeys the call, and God blesses him. I don't know who said it, but I love this statement: "Failure doesn't have to be final when God gives the second mile of grace."

Thank God for second chances! Anybody need a second chance today? In Jonah's life, God recommissions and renews the commission to him.

2. The Repentant City

"that great city" (Jonah 3:3-9)

Not only do we see God's recommissioning of Jonah—the word of the Lord coming to him a second time—but something happened in the city of Nineveh.

The size and scale of the city of Nineveh were enormous:

"Arise, go to Nineveh, **that great city**" (Jonah 3:2a, *emphasis added*).

"Now Nineveh was an **exceedingly great city**, three days' journey in breadth" (Jonah 3:3b, *emphasis added*).

"Arise, go to Nineveh, **that great city**" (Jonah 1:2a, *emphasis added*).

God called Nineveh a *great city*. We don't know why God called it a great city except that it would make sense due to its sheer size and scale.

For many years, cynics downsized the truth of this city because they didn't believe there could be any cities of this scale or size in the ancient world. But of course, as archeologists have done and continue to do, instead of disproving the Bible, they affirm the testimony of the Bible. In recent discoveries of at ancient Nineveh, it has been proven this city, in its scope, was somewhere between 45 and 60 miles wide or around. It had a 100-foot wall that circled the city. It had 1500 towers that rose nearly 200 feet tall. And the Bible tells us, the city was "three days' journey in breadth" (Jonah 3:3b). In fact, the last verse of the book of Jonah is a reference to the size of the city:

"And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11).

It was a big city! As you know, big cities have big opportunities, but they also have big challenges and big problems. We see that regularly today, don't we?

Not only does that great city refer to the enormity of the city, I think it is a reference to the iniquity of the people. It was a wicked city. It was an awful place. It was the capital city of the evil empire of Assyria.

Nineveh was established by Sennacherib around 700 BC, and their political power and aggressive assaults made them a nation of terrorists. As I have mentioned before, the ancient city of Nineveh was somewhere near modern-day Mosul in Iraq. From Nineveh, the Assyrians ruled the world and brought siege and terror upon people.

The Assyrians were violent, bloodthirsty, cruel, heartless, and brutal exhibitionists. They depicted their harsh handling of people, both in art and in real life demonstrations. The Assyrians were an enemy that lived at war—they were a warring people. They were known for their violence. So many of the stone carvings depicted the Assyrians as men at war. Murals and frescoes depicted their domination. They would do whatever they wanted to do to destroy the lives of people.

There were pictures and images of the suffering of inhumanity at their hand, and ultimately, psychological terror. There are renderings of the Assyrians skinning people, blinding others, and impaling some on stakes. On one occasion, an Assyrian king took the heads of the leaders of a city, put their heads on posts, and displayed them at the gates of the city to declare to anyone, anytime, anywhere that the Assyrians were never to be taken lightly not threatened by rebellion.

The Assyrians took people into slavery. They were the developers of Battering Rams' Heads, and with brass, wood, and chains, they would destroy the gates of the city in their assault. There are so many recorded things about what these people did. Therefore when you read about the Assyrians in the book of Jonah, they were known for their violence. As a result, Nineveh was a city of great iniquity.

There was an urgency of message. And what was it?

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4b)

40 is the number of testing in the Bible: 40 days of the temptation of Jesus, 40 years in the wilderness of the people of Israel. 40 is a number of significance. But here, the Bible is telling us that the clock was ticking, and Jonah went to Nineveh to preach this message: "Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4b). This mighty fortress, this violent people, this warring nation was suddenly being told they were going to be taken down.

Imagine Jonah, this one Jewish prophet (among more than 100,000 people), walking through the city (probably 15 to 20 miles a day) and preaching the same message: "Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4b). He preached a sermon with one point, and it was a sharp point. No illustrations. No humor. Just a straight-on message. The Bible tells us that as Jonah preached this harsh message of the pending judgment of God, Jonah preached it with authority and urgency, and "the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5a).

Kind of hard to believe, isn't it? What was it that got their attention? We don't know why or how. Some have suggested that Jonah's exposure for three days and three nights to the gastric juices in the belly of the fish might have caused his skin tone to break down, giving him the appearance of being jaundiced, almost ghostly, maybe even bleached hair—not to mention the seaweed and stench! Think about somebody who looked like Guy Fieri (without his signature sunglasses and Camaro) walking through an ancient Middle Eastern town preaching a message of judgment. They would probably ask, "Who is this and where in the world did he come from?"

We don't know. It's just speculation. But what we do know is that whatever the people saw and heard, it got their attention.

"And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5).

The interesting thing is that the Bible doesn't say the people heard the word of Jonah and they *repented*. No. They heard of word of God through Jonah, and "the people of Nineveh *believed* God" (Jonah 3:5a, *emphasis added*).

Repentance and *faith* are sort of two sides of the same coin. It's difficult to separate them. It takes repentance for there to be genuine faith. But when genuine faith begins, it leads us to repentance.

"Repentance begins with believing God. As we believe Him and His word, we have the power to transform our lives as He wills. You can do many other things associated with repentance, but if they do not begin with believing on and trusting God, they are all useless works of the flesh." —David Guzik

You and I cannot create righteousness before God. We cannot erase the stain of our sin. We can't remove who we are, what we are, by our nature simply by our own will, effort, persistence, and perseverance. We are sinners. We are broken. We are defiled. But when we look to God, to His Word, and we believe what He says about who He is, who Jesus is, and what we are, that's the moment that change comes in life. Faith—believing God—begins to change everything!

The Bible tells us the people of Nineveh "put on sackcloth" (Jonah 3:5b). That's kind of a weird thing for us to understand, right? They changed their outward appearance.

To change your outward appearance is to essentially create a means of both presentation and demonstration. They didn't have social media; they couldn't post on Facebook or one of the other media sites to state, "I've done a terrible thing, and I need you to pray that God will deliver me." Although they didn't have a means of posting, they did have the ability to literally demonstrate and dramatize what was going on inwardly. Sackcloth and ashes were an outward expression of an inward humiliation and brokenness.

Sackcloth was made from the hair of black goats. It was rough and harsh, uncomfortable to wear. It depicted on the outside the discomfort on the inside. And then ashes were simply the ruins of burning embers. Ashes were blackened pieces to demonstrate humility and shame. It was certainly a picture of repentance, but it really was an expression of faith. What were they sorry for?

"But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (Jonah 3:8).

They knew what was wrong. They knew what they had become. They were beastly people. And somehow, when they heard of the judgment of God, they turned to the Lord. I love the words of the king:

“Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish” (Jonah 3:9).

Who knows? God might see and hear our brokenness... our crying... our prayer... and God might change the course of our future.

God did a work of grace in the face of a people great in iniquity and evil. Never discount God’s power in the lives of individuals or even nations. God can change anyone, anytime, anywhere!

3. The Relenting God

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

The relenting God is such a wonderful, yet mysterious text. The king said that *maybe God would relent*. And in Jonah 3:10, *God relented*. Some translations say that God *changed His mind*. That’s a little harder for us to get our heads around. On the one hand, one of the greatest doctrinal truths, realities and foundations of our faith in Scripture is based upon the expressed testimony and clear instruction of the immutability of God. God doesn’t change! Dr. David Jeremiah describes it this way:

“He is subject to no change in His being. He can’t be different today than He was yesterday. There never was a time when God was not. There never will be a time when He is not. There never will be a time when He shall cease to be. He has not evolved. He has not grown. He has not improved. None of the reasons we change affect God. Sometimes we change for the better, but God does not because He is perfect.” —Dr. David Jeremiah

Now that’s a marvelous truth, but it’s a mysterious thing when this passage tells us that *God relented*. So what does it mean? God’s change in this moment is not one of inconsistency, nor is it something that is contradictory. It is simply a greater revelation of the nature and character of God! In Scripture when the Bible seems to indicate God changed something, it was always a reflection of His mercy. It disposes the idea that God is capricious, merciless, and harsh. Yes, He’s a God of judgment because of His righteous character, but He is also a God of great mercy.

The judgment of God is not one of determinism, but clearly a matter of decisive action. It's consistent with His truth, His righteousness, and His holiness. God doesn't change His mind to accommodate human sin. Never has there been a culture that needs to hear that message more than we do right now. God does not change His mind to accommodate human sin, but He does change human hearts to avert the consequence of divine wrath. Thank God for the work of grace and mercy that leads us to believe Him and then, to be delivered by Him!

"Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die... But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezekiel 18:4, 21-23).

God has no pleasure in the end result of judgment! That's why He intersects the severity of judgment with the sufficiency of mercy. He not only did that with Jonah and Nineveh, he also did that 2000 years ago, intersecting this world—the timeline of life—when He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world. Why did Jesus come?... to remove the judgment of sin?... God's judgment against sin? No. Jesus came to fulfill it, to take it, to complete it, to create a path and an opportunity of righteousness. While judgment is severe, mercy is sufficient!

"For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God put His judgment on Jesus so that, yes, His mercy might be applied to you!

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

God didn't send Jonah into Nineveh just so God could go ahead with judgment. He didn't need Jonah, but God sent Jonah so that God could remove the judgment through faith in Him. And God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world not to remove His judgment, but to fulfill that judgment that He might extend to you (through the name of Jesus) grace, mercy, peace, and the privilege of a second chance in life.

It begins in salvation, but it goes beyond there. Don't get me wrong; this isn't easy *believism*. Look at John 3:18-20:

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:18-30).

Condemnation is real! God’s judgment is real! We cannot downgrade its severity, but thank God, we can believe the testimony of who Christ is and what He has done for us. Paul expressed it this way in the book of Titus:

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:4-6).

God is a God of second chances! He gave Nineveh an opportunity to turn to Him. Yes, this is an ancient story and testimony, but through it, I believe you need to hear that God is giving you an opportunity to turn to Him today. I don’t want you to miss this moment!

God, thank You today for the wonder of who You are and all that You have accomplished for us. Thank You for the wonderful, merciful love of Jesus. Thank You that You have intervened in our vile and violent hearts to give us the opportunity to know the wonderful deliverance and the glorious victory of grace because of Jesus!

I pray that if there’s a man, a woman, a child here today who needs You, that today, they would look to You, the Author and Finisher of our faith. May they today—just as these have done through baptism—declare, “I can’t cleanse myself. I can’t change myself. But I trust Jesus.” Lord, let this moment be a moment of defining faith.

I also pray for others who are here, who know and believe You, but they need a new start. They need to start in a church fellowship. They need to begin again. They need a second chance to be a part of a fellowship—one that’s not perfect, but one that strives to be a part of the purpose and the mission to which You’ve called them. You are calling some you are recommissioning—someone today who needs to start over, especially in their relationship with Your church. And I pray You would gather them today as well. I pray it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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