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The Road Too Often Traveled

Jonah 2

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Cliff Schimmels relays the following story from his book, *Lessons From the Good Old Days*:

One winter morning the year before I started to school, my dad came in and asked if I would like to go with him to feed the cows. That sounded like fun, so I dressed in my warmest clothes, including the mittens connected by a string through the sleeves of my jacket, and went out with my dad to take my place in the world of work.

It was a pleasant morning. The sun was shining brightly, but it was cold and the ground was covered with a blanket of new snow. We harnessed the team, Babe and Blue, and went over the hill with a wagon full of hay. After we had found the cows and unloaded the hay for them, we started home. Then my dad came up with a good idea. "Would you like to drive?" he asked. And I responded in typical manly fashion. I like to drive anything: cars, trucks, golf carts or donkey carts. I think the attraction must be the power. There is such a sense of power to be in control of something larger than I am, and it's good for my male ego.

I took the lines from my dad, held them looped over my hands as he showed me, and we plodded back home. I was thrilled. I was in control. I was driving. But the plodding bothered me. I decided that while I was in control, we should speed up, so I clucked the horses along and they began to hurry. First they began to trot, and I decided that was a much better pace. We were moving along and we would get home much faster. But Babe and Blue came up with a better idea. They decided that if they would run, we would get home even sooner.

The horses went to work on their plan and began to run. As I remember it, they were running as fast as I have ever seen horses run, but that observation might have a slight exaggeration factor built in. But they did run. The wagon bounced from mound to mound.

As the prairie dog holes whizzed by, I concluded that we were in a dangerous situation, and I started to try my best to slow down this runaway team. I pulled and tugged on the lines until my hands cramped. I cried and pleaded, but nothing worked. Old Babe and Blue just kept running.

I glanced over at my dad, and he was just sitting there, looking out across the pasture and watching the world go by. By now, I was frantic. My hands were cut from the lines, the tears streaming down my face were almost frozen from the winter cold, and stuff was running out of my nose. And my dad was just sitting there watching the world go by.

Finally, in utter desperation, I turned to him and said as calmly as I could, "Here, Daddy, I don't want to drive anymore."

- "The Runaway" by Cliff Schimmels, *Stories For the Heart*

Whatever it is inside that little boy that makes him want to drive, the reality is that it's inside all of us. There is something within us that makes us want to take hold of those reigns and drive. We don't want to just drive – we want to gallop. It isn't until that team is completely out of control, that we finally look to God and say, "I don't think I want to drive anymore."

What is it that causes us to be like that? Why do we do that? Some time ago I read the story of Lisa Lundstrom. Some of you may remember Lowell and Connie Lundstrom, a traveling evangelistic family team from South Dakota who sang and preached the gospel, often coming through the Midwest. The Lundstrom's daughter, Lisa, reached the point where she didn't want much to do with her mom and dad and all that they represented. About the age of 15 Lisa decided to leave and go out on her own. By the time she was 17 she was

arrested for prostitution, and had been into alcohol and drugs. She was raped four times and was beaten multiple times. Finally, at the absolute bottom of her life, she submitted herself and came back to God.

The reality is – that is a road too often traveled. It would be wonderful to say that that was the exception. But it really isn't. Many of you are familiar with Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, who today is in a position to take over his father's ministry. But before he got to where he is today, he went through a period of rebellion and alcohol, and basically reached rock bottom before he was willing to submit himself. He finally began to believe what he knew was true about God. But for some reason, he wasn't willing to accept that truth until he hit bottom.

Nearly every week I enter into a conversation with someone concerning a person they really care about (either one of their children, a spouse, a parent, a brother, a sister, or a friend) who's going down this path of self-destruction and spiraling further and further down. Typically, the conversation ends with the comment, "This person may have to hit bottom before they are willing to look up."

That is a road far too often traveled, and the question I find myself asking is: Why is that? Why is it necessary to inflict so much pain on ourselves? Why is it necessary to go down that path of self-destruction so far, and cause ourselves and people we love so much pain before we ultimately accept that what God says about Himself is true? Is it possible to avoid such a destructive path? Maybe you have children, family members or a dear friend who is going down that path, and you wonder where it will end and if there is any hope. You need to know that in the second chapter of Jonah there is much hope for that person.

As we've mentioned before, Jonah is considered a minor prophet – not minor because of the message, but minor because of the size of the book. Most of the books of the prophets in the Old Testament are written in the style of a series of oracles, or speeches put together. The book of Jonah is different, because it is really a narrative (a story) which is unusual in the prophets.

It's interesting to notice the narrative style of Jonah 1. As it begins telling the story, the first half of the chapter contains a lot of detail, which slows the story down and causes us to stop and think, "Why is Jonah doing this?" Then, the second half of chapter 1 picks up more of an action plot sequence, and there is fast, rapid-fire statements and questions which speed up the text, causing more anxiety. It becomes more energetic because it is getting into some heavy drama. But now, in chapter 2, we shift out of that narrative style into poetry. So interpreting Jonah 2 is more like interpreting one of the Psalms than it is like interpreting chapter 1. In noticing these features of the literature itself, it's interesting how the writer keeps using different literary features in order to teach us theology. Psalms is the language of the heart, and poetry is the language of looking inside our minds and hearts and reflecting on who we are and what we're thinking. Poetry, therefore, is a good genre to communicate that.

Jonah 2:1: "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish." You have to love that first verse. What you really need to love is the word "*Then*." Stop and think about what that word represents. Think about all that Jonah has been through without stopping to pray. Jonah is running from God and gets on a ship. The storm comes up and he fears for his life to the point where he's thrown overboard. In his own mind, he concludes

that he will die by drowning at sea and he sinks to the bottom of the sea. The details will unfold in chapter 2 that show he was basically on the threshold of drowning, wrapped up in weeds, sunk to the bottom of the sea. In the midst of all that, a fish comes along and swallows him up. The writer says, “*Then* Jonah prayed to the LORD.”

Why did Jonah wait until then to pray? That’s a question I ask myself often. Why are we so stubborn sometimes to admit that we have erred – that we have sinned – that we’re off course? What we tend to do is to think we can fix it. We know we are a little off course, but we think, “I can fix this ... I can find my way ... I can handle this.” So one mistake becomes two mistakes. One sin becomes two sins and soon we are neck deep (in the belly of the fish) and *then* we finally break our will and we ask for help.

Our kids do that all the time. There’s the determined attitude that they can do it themselves, and it isn’t until they’ve totally made a mess of things that they will come back and say, “OK, I need help.” My question is: Why is it we don’t outgrow that? Why is it that we do the same thing with God as adults?

When you read through the text of Jonah you notice there is an emphasis on spiraling down. Whatever it is that causes us to resist help and do things our own way (to take the reins and say, “I want to drive.”) – whatever it is – Jonah “had it bad.” In chapter 1 we’re told that Jonah went down to Tarshish. Then we’re told he went down to the lower deck of the ship. After that we’re told he went down into the sea. Now in chapter 2, many words are used that talk about “down into the depths of the sea and the roots of the mountains” and “down into the belly of the fish.” There is an emphasis of down, down, down, before Jonah finally is willing to look up.

Jonah 2:1 says, “Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.” It’s also worth noting that it’s not his former God. Even though Jonah had deserted God, God had not deserted Jonah. God was still the God of Jonah and was still there for him, and Jonah called out in his hour of need, from the stomach of the fish. Verse 2: “and he said, ‘I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; Thou didst hear my voice.’”

If I was a parent with a child going down that path of destruction, I would embrace verse 2 and it would fill my heart with hope. Because what verse 2 is talking about is the reality that, no matter how far down Jonah got, when he was willing to ultimately cry out to God, God was there! No matter what you’ve done – no matter what you’ve become – in that hour when you finally choose to call out to God, God will be there and He will answer. That’s what Jonah discovers on this journey. Jonah had some mixed-up theology and some warped views about who God is and how God operates. It’s obvious as we go through this text that Jonah really believed somewhere along the way that he had crossed over the line. He believed that there was no hope for him.

In the second half of verse 2, Jonah talks about going down to the depth of Sheol. In the Hebrew language and culture, Sheol was considered the grave. But there was a broader definition of Sheol, which had to do with what might be called a waiting room for hell. They believed when you died in your sins and wickedness, these people went to Sheol, where they would wait until ultimately God would call them, judge them, and send them into an eternal lake of fire. In Jonah’s own mind, he had crossed the line somewhere and no longer was

deserving of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He believed that there was no hope for him and that he was right on the edge of Sheol. In his mind, Jonah was doomed not just to die, but doomed to be separated from God forever, because he did not understand God and His compassion, His love and His mercy.

When I was reading that story about Lisa Lundstrom, it was interesting to hear her talk about that frame of mind she was in. When she started to stray, she reached the point where she knew what she was doing was wrong, and she knew it was headed to destruction. But she reached a point where she thought she had crossed that line – where it didn't matter. There was now no hope. She knew she had blown it, so why even try stopping? Basically, that is what caused her to go fully down the steps of depravity, because she thought there was no hope.

That's the same mindset that Jonah is in here in this chapter. Somewhere along the way, he is convinced that he's crossed that line – that there is no hope – that he is doomed forever. That feeling is reflected in his words in verse 2, and yet he is saying that, in that hour of desperation, he cried out and God was there.

Verse 3: "For Thou has cast me into the deep..." We know from chapter one that it was technically the sailors who threw Jonah into the water, but we also know that Jonah is referring to the sovereignty of God. Ultimately it was God who was overseeing what happened to him. "... Into the heart of the seas." Notice in verse 3 the emphasis on the deep, and the heart of the sea. Those are words that are talking about going down and down. "...And the current engulfed me. All Thy breakers and billows passed over me." Jonah is sinking and drowning. You almost get the feeling that he has resigned himself to the fact that he's dead and allowing himself to sink to the bottom.

Verse 4: "So I said, 'I have been expelled from Thy sight.'" The word expelled means to be banished. Jonah is under the impression that he is banished from the sight of God – that he is no longer welcomed into the presence of God and no longer has a relationship with God. Jonah is saying, "This is what I said to myself. This is what I believed in my heart to be true." At this point, Jonah believes there is absolutely no hope and he's resigned himself to his consequences.

Then he says, "Nevertheless I will look again toward Thy holy temple." He is saying, "I believed that I was done for. Nevertheless, I have now experienced the salvation of God and I know that I will one day see God's Temple again." The Temple, of course, represented much to them. It represented the presence of God and the basis upon which they had a relationship with God. It represented the sacrifice for sin that made them acceptable before God. All of that is wrapped up in poetic language. He simply is saying, "In this hour when I thought I was completely banished from God, and He would never look at me again, I realize now that I'm welcomed back into the presence of God. That I am experiencing God's grace and forgiveness and mercy." If we take the New Testament fulfillment of the Temple, in our language it would be realizing that Jesus' death on the cross was adequate for sin, that his sins are forgiven and God's grace, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness go beyond what he ever could have imagined.

Jonah is learning an aspect of the character of God that, for some reason, he did not believe before. He goes on in verse 5 to say, "Water encompassed me to the point of death."

The word *encompassed* in the Hebrew could mean “was in my throat,” and that’s probably what he’s saying. He’s talking about drowning and his throat was full of water – very graphic language. “...The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head.” You get a picture of him drowning, with weeds up into his head and body.

Verse 6: “I descended {*notice the downward spiral still*} to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever. {*Probably talking about the weeds that come up off the bottom of the sea – like jail bars that are holding him in this prison.*} But Thou has brought up ... {*notice the emphasis now: after spiraling down since chapter one, finally God has brought him up.*} ... my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. While I was fainting {*or fading*} away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to Thee {*God heard his prayer and answered his prayer and delivered him*} into Thy holy temple.”

Verse 2 and verse 7 together would provide what we would call an *inclusio* – which is a technical term for bookends or brackets. That tells us that this is the theology he is trying to teach. Verse 2 and 7 are about the fact that, in his hour of desperation, Jonah thought he had blown it and crossed the line, to be banished and spend eternity separated from God. When he was in that frame of mind he desperately cried out to the Lord. And God was there and God heard him. Rather than punishing him, God poured out His grace and mercy, and Jonah is now experiencing God’s salvation. And then verses 3 through 6 unfold the details of how that came about and Jonah’s thought process.

When I look at verses 3 through 7, I think about the awesome forgiveness and faithfulness and compassion of God. The reason Jonah could not believe that God could still care about him and would be compassionate is because, in human relationships, there is no one who will go that far with us. There is no one who will be as faithful as God will be. Let’s face it – we all have our limits. When pushed to the ultimate end of those limits, we are not faithful like God is faithful. People who are on this downward spiral like Jonah often find themselves alone, isolated and believing that everyone has rejected them. It’s hard to have a frame of reference and a belief that there is a God who is different from that. What is being revealed in Jonah 2 is very much the heart of God. At that moment it is revealed that there is a God who is ultimately faithful and merciful and compassionate and gracious. We believe that God is who He says He is, as revealed in Jonah 2.

Verses 8 and 9 are a summary of what Jonah has learned. “Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness.” I think here he is talking about the sailors who were worshipping vain idols. In chapter one, when the storm came on with such intensity, they were crying out to their gods to deliver them. And they basically concluded, “Our gods are powerless to do anything.” They said to Jonah, “Maybe your God can help.” But they were realizing in their hour of desperation that their god was empty, vain and powerless. Their god could do nothing for them. He says, “they forsake their faithfulness.” It means they forsake that god and they are no longer faithful to that god. In the hour when they needed that god the most, he was not there.

It’s like that for people who make pleasure or material things or position or title their god. In their hour of deepest need, when they are in ultimate despair, they call out to their god, and their god is powerless to do anything. That’s what people find out when they are “in the belly of the fish.” They find out that the god they have pursued and sought after has no power to deliver them in their hour of greatest need.

The contrast is in verse 9: “But I will sacrifice to Thee with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the LORD.” Jonah is saying that his experience with God is just the opposite of that. These pagan sailors, in their hour of deepest need, found out that their gods were powerless to deliver. But Jonah is saying, that, in his hour of deepest despair, when he felt he deserved eternal punishment and to be banished from the presence of God, he cried out to God. Rather than finding God powerless to save, he found just the opposite. He found that his God provided his salvation. He was a God filled with compassion, goodness, and forgiveness. Jonah found that in his hour of deepest need, God was adequate. Jonah is now committing himself to this God. “I will keep my vow,” which means he would be obedient to whatever God calls him to be, because he realizes salvation is from the Lord.

One of the big mistakes that Jonah made in his theology was forgetting that the reason he was acceptable to God and welcomed into the presence of God in the first place was not because of his performance. It was not because he was a prophet. It was not because he was doing something for God. The only reason he was acceptable was because of what God had done for him. Therefore, when he reached the bottom and the absolute pit (the belly of the fish), that had not changed. Jonah wasn’t welcomed into the presence of God because of his performance – but rather because of the salvation provided him from God.

Jonah is reminded that salvation is from the Lord. We understand that it’s not because we’re good that God accepts us, but because of Jesus’ death on the cross that we are acceptable in the presence of God. That doesn’t change when we’re at the bottom of despair. We don’t deserve it now. We don’t deserve it then. But God, in his grace and compassion, accepts us and forgives us.

Verse 10 says that Jonah learned a lesson. School for this day was completed – theology was learned. “Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto dry land.” Jonah ultimately took the spiral down to the bottom, before he was willing to listen and learn what he should have known about God. He could have avoided all the pain and self-inflicted suffering but, for whatever reason, he didn’t learn and he didn’t believe. But now that Jonah had hit bottom he began to look up. God said, “OK, Jonah. You’ve got that.” In an act of sovereignty, God says to the fish, “Spit this guy on the beach and we’ll go from there.”

The question is: Did Jonah really learn this lesson? We’ll answer that next week when we finish the story. Why is it necessary for us to learn those things about God {that what He says about Himself is really true} the hard way? Why are we so determined to do it our own way, to afflict so much pain on ourselves and the people we love, ultimately to hit bottom and realize the truth about who God is? Why is it we have to learn the hard way?

It would be interesting to take a poll to see how many of you actually hit rock bottom before you ultimately began to look up. Why is that road necessary? Every month there is someone who has attended the church for a length of time and they will start down this path of destruction. They will fall away from the church and they will spend years inflicting pain on themselves and their family members, causing unlimited heartache. But eventually after years they finally hit bottom and they come back bearing the scars of the journey. They finally understand that what God said about Himself is really true. Why was that journey

necessary? Why can't we read a chapter like Jonah 2 and believe that what God says about Himself is true. If what God says about Himself is true, why would we run? Why would we flee instead of submit to a God with this kind of compassion, grace, mercy? Why do we do that?

Some of you have sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, parents or friends who are going down that path and you know, in your heart, that they will end up "in the belly of the fish" because they are determined to get there. For you, there is tremendous hope that, in that moment, God will be there. You can't go with them. It's a desperate feeling for you, but there is hope because God is faithful.

"The small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Its red-tiled roof was one of many in this poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the Brazilian village. It was a comfortable home. Maria and her daughter, Christina, had done what they could to add color to the gray walls and warmth to the hard dirt floor: an old calendar, a faded photograph of a relative, a wooden crucifix. The furnishings were modest: a pallet on either side of the room, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove.

Maria's husband had died when Christina was an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refusing opportunities to remarry, got a job and set out to raise her young daughter. And now, 15 years later, the worst years were over. Though Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes. And now Christina was old enough to get a job and help out.

Some said Christina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn't have had her pick of husbands. Her olive skin and brown eyes kept a steady stream of prospects at her door. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. She also had that rare magic some women have that makes every man feel like a king just by being near them. But it was her spirited curiosity that made her keep all the men at arm's length.

She spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighborhood for exciting avenues and city life. Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Maria was always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets. "People don't know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?"

Maria knew exactly what Christina would do, or would have to do for a living. That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

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. With her purse full of small black and white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew that 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 street-walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture—taped to 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.

– "Come Home" by Max Lucado, *Stories For the Heart*

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