

## The God Who Runs After Us

### Jonah 2

Several years ago, I heard a sobering story. A young man had recently given his heart to the Lord. His childhood friends invited him for a Sunday morning horseback ride through the countryside. As they rode along, enjoying the open air, the sound of hooves on the trail, and easy conversation, the distant ringing of church bells began to drift across the fields. The young man suddenly grew quiet. Then he reined in his horse and told his friends he had to turn back right away. When they asked why, he replied with quiet urgency, “I’m afraid if I don’t turn back now, I’ll never hear those church bells again.”

That story has always stayed with me. It’s a picture of a tender conscience—the fear of drifting so far from God that you can no longer hear His call. The bells were still ringing, but the young man sensed how easily they could fade into the background of life if he kept riding in the wrong direction.

That is exactly where we left Jonah last week—running from God’s call. This week we watch God run after him. The same God who hurled the storm now hurls grace. When we run, God pursues—not to punish, but to rescue, awaken, and change us from the inside out.

**Main Idea:** When we run from God, He pursues us with relentless grace — turning our rock-bottom into a place of prayer and beginning the long, patient work of changing our hearts, even when our repentance is still reluctant and incomplete.

Let’s dive into Jonah chapter 2 and see God’s relentless love in action and Jonah’s response.

#### 1. God’s Relentless Pursuit

We begin with God’s relentless pursuit. Jonah chapter two opens and closes with two simple but powerful verses that frame everything in between. Listen first to verse 1 and verse 10: “*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...’ And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”* (Jonah 2:1, 10)

Between those two verses — sandwiched in the darkness of the fish — we find Jonah’s prayer. Jonah is in the darkest place imaginable — inside the great fish for three days and three nights. It’s cold, suffocating, and seemingly hopeless. Yet right there, at rock bottom, God is still pursuing him.

Remember, in Jonah 1:17 we read, *“And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.”* The same God who hurled the storm now appoints the fish — not as punishment, but as rescue and transportation. God could have let Jonah drown. Instead, He turns the depths into a place of prayer and preparation. This is relentless pursuit. God refuses to let His runaway prophet go.

Tim Keller helps us see the wonder of this moment. At the bottom, when Jonah finally begins to see his own moral ill-desert — that he deserved the judgment he was receiving — and his spiritual impotence — that he could do nothing to save himself — grace starts to break through. As his prayer will demonstrate, Jonah realizes he is “barred” from God forever by his own sin, yet God lifts him up anyway.

How many of you have discovered this? The deeper you are touched by the wonder of God’s grace, the more willing you become to extend that same grace to others — even to the people you find hardest to love. Keller reminds us that God’s grace becomes wondrous, endlessly consoling, beautiful, and humbling only when we grasp three truths:

1. we deserve nothing but condemnation,
2. we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves,
3. God has saved us at infinite cost to himself.

Jonah begins to taste this wonder in the fish. He sees, as his prayer will show, that “salvation belongs to the Lord” alone.

Yet, despite this breakthrough in the fish, Jonah has not grasped grace as deeply as we might at first think. There is still a sense of superiority and self-righteousness that will later cause him to resent the mercy God shows to those he sees as inferior. But our merciful God patiently works with Jonah, and us, flawed and clueless though we are.

My brothers and sisters, when we run from God, He doesn't abandon us. He comes after us with mercy. Sometimes He uses storms. Sometimes He uses the belly of a fish. Yet He pursues us because He is determined to bring us to the end of ourselves — so that we see our desperate need and the only remedy: His redeeming grace.

The very storm that threatened to kill Jonah became the means God used to bring him back.

That is the mystery and wonder of God's pursuing grace. At rock bottom, when Jonah finally sees his desperate need for grace — when he realizes he is barred from God forever by his own sin — yet God reaches down and lifts him up anyway.

God has brought Jonah to rock bottom — and now we see how he responds. This brings us to the next step in God's pursuit:

## **2. Jonah's Reluctant Prayer**

Let's look more closely at the prayer itself. Jonah cries out:

*"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. <sup>3</sup> For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your breakers and your waves passed over me. <sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' <sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head. <sup>6</sup> To 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. <sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my*

*prayer came to you, into your holy temple. <sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. <sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”* Jonah 2:2-9

Notice that Jonah remembers the Lord. He thanks God for deliverance. He vows to sacrifice with thanksgiving and declares, “Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

This is real prayer. It shows turning. Jonah stops running long enough to call on God. He moves from silence to supplication, from despair to hope.

But, as I mentioned earlier, despite this breakthrough in the fish, Jonah has not grasped grace as deeply as we might at first think. In verse 8 he says, “Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake the hope of steadfast love” (Jonah 2:8). He rightly condemns the obvious idols of the pagans, but he remains blind to the more subtle idols in his own heart — his nationalistic pride and his resentment toward “the other.” There is still a sense of superiority and self-righteousness that will later cause him to explode in anger when God shows mercy to those he sees as inferior.

Notice what is still missing in his desperate prayer. He never confesses his prejudice against Nineveh. He never asks God to break his hard heart toward “the other.” He thanks God for rescue, but his heart is not yet fully surrendered to God’s merciful mission. This is reluctant prayer — genuine movement toward God, but still mixed with self-focus and incomplete repentance.

Remember, because of Jonah’s heart issue, he ran from the presence of the Lord. Do you know the transforming presence of God in your life?

As one Christian podcaster observed, “in church settings, we often talk about inviting God’s presence or setting the atmosphere so He can move. But the problem isn’t that the Spirit is absent — He already dwells in every believer. Like Jonah, the real issue is our own

resistance: our pride, our need for control, our fear, our bitterness. These are the walls that keep the Spirit from having full influence. Worship, prayer, and repentance aren't about summoning God's presence to come down — they're about stopping our resistance so He can lead, convict, and empower obedience from the inside out.”  
Chasity Latrice

That's exactly what we see with Jonah. He offers a real but reluctant prayer in the fish. But here's what's still missing: he never deals with his prejudice or lack of compassion toward the people God called him to warn.

The deepest repentance God wants from us is often in how we see and treat “the other.” God can use a skilled and competent person in ministry, but a lack of character — especially a lack of love — can poison the well.

As one leadership coach has said, “In ministry, your character will be tested far more than your competency ever will be.” The lack of it will eventually tear down what your competence builds and, worse, bring reproach to the name of Jesus.

Timothy Keller puts his finger on the deeper issue: “Twice, then, Jonah finds himself in a close encounter with people who are racially and religiously different. In both cases his behavior is dismissive and unhelpful, while the pagans uniformly act more admirably than he does. This is one of the main messages of the book, namely, that God cares how we believers relate to and treat people who are deeply different from us.”

It's important to note that Bible commentators differ on how deeply Jonah repented in the fish. Some suggest that while he renewed his commitment to obey the Lord, he never truly repented of his deeper heart issue — his lack of mercy and compassion for people who are “other.” Others, however, see genuine repentance in both his prayers and his actions.

David Guzik, for example, lists several marks of what he views as true repentance in Jonah:

1. **Honesty about sin** — Jonah openly admits who he is and what he has done (Jonah 1:9-10).
2. **Willingness to be cast into the sea** — He accepts the consequences of his disobedience and tells the sailors to throw him overboard (Jonah 1:12). Moreover, Jonah’s prayer, recognized that “you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas” (verse 3). Jonah knew that there was divine justice and that he deserved it.” (Timothy Keller)
3. **Turning to prayer** — In the depths he cries out to God three times in this chapter alone (Jonah 2:2, 2:4, 2:7).
4. **Gratitude** — He thanks God for deliverance even while still inside the fish (Jonah 2:9).
5. **Renewed commitment to his vow** — He declares he will fulfill what he once vowed (Jonah 2:9 — “what I have vowed I will pay”).
6. **Giving glory to God** — He ends with the great declaration, “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:9).

Jonah shows several marks of repentance. Yet, others, like me, see his repentance as falling short because it doesn’t get to the root of his resistance. He relents in desperation, but the deeper heart issue — his lack of love for God and people—remains.

Again, Jonah is a work in progress. His prayer is real, but his heart still needs more testing and refining.

The New Testament shows us this same loving process. God uses conviction, correction, chastisement, and confrontation because He disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:5-6).

To illustrate this: Imagine you take your child to a birthday party. The child starts acting up — smearing cake, pulling hair, ripping into presents. First, you call the child’s name to get their attention. If they don’t listen, you give a clear warning. If they keep acting up, you take them to the bathroom for a spanking. And if even that doesn’t change their behavior, you finally say, “Come on. We’re going home.”

That's how God disciplines His children — starting with gentle conviction, moving to correction, then chastisement, and sometimes strong confrontation when we refuse to listen.

God is not looking for robotic obedience. He wants devotion motivated by love — love for Him and love for people — a love shaped by His mercy toward us. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

This brings us to our final point:

### **3. The Remaining Resistance**

Jonah is rescued and given a second chance. But chapter 4 will show that the deeper work is not yet finished. Again, when God shows mercy to Nineveh, Jonah becomes angry. His heart is still resistant to God's compassion for "the other."

The root of Jonah's resistance is the same thing that causes many believers to drift into spiritual slumber: a heart that has not yet been fully broken and remade by grace.

Like Jonah, who was asleep to how God was working around him, what causes us to fall asleep spiritually, even as believers?

Jesus gives a sobering wake-up call to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-2:

*"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.'"*

Jesus tells the church in Sardis, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Revelation 3:2). That means we must identify the areas of our faith that are still alive — however weakly — and give them urgent attention: returning to prayer with honesty,

confessing sin quickly, yielding to the Holy Spirit instead of resisting Him, and choosing to love people we naturally avoid. We stop coasting on reputation and start investing real effort into what is fading, so that what is about to die can live again.

Beloved, we can have the reputation of being alive — active in church, serving, even praying — while our hearts are drifting into spiritual deadness. We drift through resistance to the light — ignoring the gentle (or not-so-gentle) alerts of God's Word, the nudges of the Holy Spirit, or circumstances designed to wake us. We hit the snooze button on conviction and reach for quick escapes: scrolling, alcohol, secret sins, like pornography, busyness, or a subtle preference for the familiar darkness. The result? We remain inactive when we should be shining, and worse, we drift when we should be progressing forward.

We may not be consciously running from the Lord, yet we can drift into spiritual slumber through neglect, excuses, and delay. We put off caring for our souls, put off serving the Lord, and slowly grow weak and comfortable with things that should appall us. Before we know it, we find ourselves doing things we never thought we would do. When we resist the urgings of the Holy Spirit, we simultaneously weaken our power to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil (James 4:7).

But mercifully, God doesn't leave us in our sleep or drift. He provides wake-up calls — interferences in our routines, moments of clarity, and above all, the finished work of the cross that breaks sin's power. Our part is to respond: to wake up, to strengthen what remains, and is about to die, to cast off the deeds of darkness, be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ as our armor of light, so we can walk as children of the day (Romans 13:12-14).

This is the honest reality of the Christian life. Repentance is more than a one time experience; its an ongoing process. God meets us even in our reluctant prayers and incomplete turning, then continues the patient work of changing our hearts. He uses storms, discipline, and even confrontation because as a good Father He will not leave us in our resistance.

What made Jonah's reluctant prayer from a flawed heart answerable? What made the mercy and patience he received possible, even though his repentance was still incomplete?

Again, it was what Jesus Himself pointed to: Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of the fish pictured Jesus' willing descent into suffering and death.

- Jonah went down in rebellion and resistance. Jesus, the Greater Jonah, went down in perfect obedience and love. He descended into the darkness for sinners so that we who run from God could be brought back to life.
- Jonah was delivered from the fish so he could eventually go to Nineveh. Jesus was raised from the dead so He could bring salvation to the nations — including “outsiders” like the Ninevites (and us).
- Jesus didn't run from the hard mission. He ran straight to the cross for His enemies — including you and me — so that we could be forgiven, restored, and changed from the inside out.

## **Conclusion**

Where might you still be resisting God, rooted in self-righteousness and pride? The deepest test of our faith is often how we see and relate to people who are different from us — racially, culturally, politically, or religiously. This was Jonah's core issue, and it remains one of the biggest tests for believers today. How we treat “the other” reveals whether our repentance has truly reached the heart or stopped at the surface.

Remember the young man on the horseback ride who turned back when he heard the church bells. He feared drifting so far that he would never hear God's call again. Jonah heard the call again in the fish, but his heart was still a work in progress. The same is true for many of us.

Beloved, let me ask you honestly: Are you resisting God right now in the area of how you see and treat people who are different from you? Is self-righteous pride keeping you from loving “the other” the way God does? Are you letting God’s pursuing grace do its deeper work in your heart today, or have you drifted — just going through the motions and heading toward a spiritual shipwreck?

The pursuing grace of Jesus is ready to meet you right where you are — to renew and restore you. If the Holy Spirit is speaking to you in this moment, respond to Him. Turn back while the bells are still ringing.