

What Do You Do When You Have Blown It?

I don't know how many of you have seen the recent Michael Jordan commercial in which Michael goes through a list of the failures that he has piled up in his illustrious career. He says something like, "26 times I took the final shot when the game was on the line and I missed." I don't remember the other numbers that are in the commercial, but they all have to do with losses and turn-overs and blown shots.

We forget quickly how many times our sports heroes failed in their careers. For many years, Babe Ruth was the record holder not just in home runs, but in strike-outs. Nobody struck out for many years more than Babe Ruth until another young man came along and beat Babe Ruth's record. That young man's name was Mickey Mantle. And Mantle's record was topped by another not too shabby ball player named Reggie Jackson. Do you know who lost the most games as a pitcher in major league history? The great Cy Young for whom the "Cy Young [pitching] Award" is named. The best pitcher every year in baseball is given an award named for the person who lost the most games in major league history. He also won the most games, but along the way he piled up hundreds of losses. Close behind Cy Young in terms of number of career losses is a fellow who was still throwing no-hitters at age 45. His name is Nolan Ryan.

It is amazing how we selectively remember only the successes of our heroes' lives and forget about all of their failures. If your entertainment tastes run more toward Hollywood than toward sports, sometime just pull out a list of all of the movies that your particular Hollywood favorite has starred in. Along with some excellent movies, you will see some of

the worst bombs ever recorded on celluloid. To your surprise you will say, “I didn’t know my favorite star was in a movie with Killer Tomatoes.”

“You mean early in his career he actually made movies with a chimpanzee?”

“So she was one of the actresses bludgeoned in Friday the 13th Part 70. I didn’t know that.”

I can tell you that there is probably no actor or actress on the face of the earth that isn’t embarrassed by some wretched movie that they appeared in.

Failure. Embarrassment. Falling short of the standard of excellence. You know, those who are unfamiliar with the Bible don’t realize that all of the great heroes in the Bible are recorded to have experienced great failures at several points in their lives. Think about the Heroes of Faith. Think about the great patriarch Abraham who was selected from all the people on the earth to be the father of faith, the source of blessing for many nations.

The great Abraham convinced his wife to pretend that she was single and to go live with one of his enemies. This whole ridiculous plot was engaged in not once, but twice with Abraham and one other time by Abraham’s son, Isaac, with his own wife. What you see in the lives of the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a consistent pattern of lying, deception, cutting corners whenever they are trapped.

Abraham’s nephew, Lot, who escaped from the judgment that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, had a slight moral lapse after he escaped from Sodom. Just a short time after God’s wonderful deliverance, Lot gets drunk and ends up sleeping with his two daughters-in-law. The New Testament calls him “righteous Lot,” but he had a little slip up.

Of course, you are familiar with King David’s failure. David received one of the great blessings of all time. From his line God promised the Messiah. What a legacy. And yet

David, of course, committed adultery with Bathsheba and tried to cover it up by murdering Bathsheba's husband.

Failure after failure among the people of God. We aren't talking about rank pagans here. We are talking about God's friends, God's chosen ones, the apples of God's eye. You say, "Well, that is the Old Testament, but we wouldn't find the same records of failure in the New Testament, would we?"

Think about Mary, Jesus' own mother, who knew how Jesus had been miraculously conceived, who was spoken to by an angel regarding who Jesus would be. And yet who, when actually observing what Jesus was doing and saying, tried to stop him in his ministry because she thought that he was crazy. Sweet, godly Mary doubted her own son's ministry after getting a visitation from an angel.

Jesus' closest disciple, Peter, of course had many failures along the way. The most celebrated of which was denying that he even knew Jesus to a little servant girl because he was embarrassed by his association with Jesus and afraid that his association with Jesus would cost him.

Have you ever blown it big time? Have you ever done something that utterly contradicted your profession of faith? That was 180 degrees from your value system, that you knew was wrong? Have you ever done anything that you are ashamed of and when you think about it, it still causes you great pain? Are there any activities that you have engaged in that you would never have thought you would do, but you did?

There is no one on earth, save Jesus of Nazareth, who can look back over the course of their lives and not have some major regrets. Most parents have regrets regarding the way they raised their children. We regret the way we yelled at our kids, or disciplined our children, or didn't discipline them for certain things. Or we might see certain patterns in our

children's lives that we realize are simply the outworking of the bad model that they saw in our homes—the over-busyness, or the perfectionism, or anxiety, or outbursts of anger, or the prejudice. Perhaps as a parent you made your decision to become a follower of Jesus after your kids were a little older and you find it difficult to reverse the trend. They are now teenagers or adults and you regret the foundation that you laid in their lives. You feel like you failed them in their early years.

Perhaps you regret a divorce and your failure as a husband or as a wife. Maybe you failed to show unconditional love to an aging parent. Perhaps you regret a significant moral failure, an affair or some addiction. Perhaps you selfishly refused your mate a child that he or she desperately wanted. Perhaps you regret spending too many hours in the office. Or the way you wasted time in school.

At some point, or at many points, all of us are confronted with the reality of having personally blown it, wasting opportunities, failing to live up to standards that we know we ought to have, falling short of our own acknowledged value system. And at some point, you are going to speak to someone who tells you a story of how they blew it, how they failed. What do you say to another person whose failure is spread out before you and what do you do when you have blown it? The title of today's message is simply that, "What Do You Do When You Have Blown It?" Let's pray.

Now I have been going through the minor prophets over the last couple of weeks. The minor prophets are not called "minor" because their messages are unimportant, but because the books that bear their names are shorter in length than the major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. So last week we began to read the book of Jonah and I promised you last week that I would talk a little bit about the fish that swallowed Jonah.

Let's talk about the fish for a moment. You will recall, if you were here last week, that Jonah was thrown into the sea by some pagan fishermen when they discovered that the storm that rose up was the result of Jonah running away from the Lord. So they decided to sacrifice Jonah overboard. Perhaps the Lord who created the storm due to his prophet's disobedience would be at peace.

And it says in Jonah 1:17, "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights."

Chapter 2:1, "From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God."

Well, in v. 17 where it says that the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, that word "provided" in Hebrew literally means "appointed" or "directed." In other words, I believe that the fish was especially created on the spot to swallow Jonah. It was a fish that already existed in the area, which God directed toward the boat.

Now, it is clear that Jonah was swallowed by a fish and not a whale. The Hebrew word "dag" clearly means "fish." Apparently, whales' throats are such that they couldn't pull a man into their stomachs, but there are a number of fish that could swallow a man whole without chewing him up, including a whale shark. The Smithsonian has on display a whale shark that had in its stomach a 1500 pound fish. Assuming the Jonah weighed something less than 1500 pounds, he could have been swallowed whole.

For those of you who are particularly fascinated by how a man could be swallowed by a fish and still remain alive, you may want to pick up a book by Dr. Bernard Ramm, who is an excellent Bible scholar, a book called *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*. Dr. Ramm thoroughly discusses the possibility of a person being able to survive inside of a fish.

Now there are a few other interesting things that perhaps you are not aware of. Archeologists found a royal seal from Egypt, dated around 600 BC which clearly portrays a

man walking out of the mouth of a giant fish. Perhaps the story of Jonah became well-known in the ancient world and folks began to make sculptures and art objects depicting the event. Further, Jonah was sent to Nineveh – well, the name “Nineveh” came from an ancient Sumerian word meaning “fish,” and “Nineveh” was written using a sign of a fish inside an enclosure.

What I think is most relevant to this whole miracle of the fish is why God used a fish at all as the means of rescuing this rebellious prophet. Why didn't God just allow a piece of wood to float by and allow Jonah to grab onto some floating raft? Or send a man with a rowboat? Or just allow a wave to carry Jonah onto shore? Why appoint a fish to swallow Jonah and then deliver Jonah from the mouth of a giant fish?

I think God's use of a fish and God's deliverance of Jonah from the mouth of a fish points to God's greater purpose in bringing the kingdom of God to earth, showing his reign over all the forces and all the false gods that the nations worshipped. Let me give you a little context for what I am trying to get at here. Perhaps you have heard that the ten plagues that were visited upon ancient Egypt were not only acts of punishment against the Egyptians for enslaving the Jews, but were also specifically chosen to show the Lord's superiority over the gods of Egypt. For example, the Egyptians worshipped the Nile River. So what did God do with the first plague? He bloodied the nose of the god of the Nile by turning the Nile River into blood.

The Egyptians worshipped the sun. They called the sun god Rah. What did the Lord do? He blotted out the sun and put darkness over the land. The Egyptians worshipped cow gods. What did the Lord God do? He killed all the cows. Every one of the plagues was specifically designed to demonstrate the Lord's superiority over all the false gods the Egyptians worshipped.

Well, guess who the Assyrians worshipped as their god? The Assyrians worshipped the god, Dagon, who was portrayed as a giant idol, half man and half fish. Dagon the fish god. So what does the Lord do in preparing his rebellious prophet to deliver a message of judgment against the city of Nineveh? He delivers Jonah from the mouth of a giant fish.

“Let me show you my power,” the Lord says. “I control the greatest fish that the world has ever known.” And so the Lord demonstrates his own reign, his own rule, over all the powers that control people.

Let’s get back to the subject of this talk. What do we do when we have blown it? You have blown it on a job and lost your job. You have blown it morally and have had an affair, or premarital sex, or have gotten involved in a homosexual relationship. You have blown it with your kids or your parents. Your boyfriend or girlfriend. Your spouse.

The first thing that I think a person needs to do when they have blown it is acknowledge the value of the pain that you are now experiencing as a result of your failure. Jonah says in v. 2, “In my distress, I called to the Lord.” In my distress, in my affliction. Literally, the word “distress” means “when I found myself in a tight place.” The picture is of someone who is being squeezed as in a vice grip. Being pressured and the pressure is building up to the point where they finally scream out and say, “Enough. I can’t take it anymore.” That squeeze, that pressure, that pain may be the internal pain of an accusing conscience that simply will not leave you alone. You can’t escape your guilt. That pain may be the consequence of watching a child totally mess up their lives because of some things that you sowed in their life. That pain may be a failed marriage, a failed ministry, a blown relationship. But the first thing that a person must do when they see that they have blown it is to acknowledge the value of the pain that is brought into their lives.

Friends, in looking at my own life and the lives that I have closely interacted with or counseled, cared for, I have come to the conviction that people rarely change any long-standing pattern or habit without pain. So long as a particular behavior works for us, so long as we derive some pleasure from it, so long as our behavior serves as an escape, so long as we are not caught, so long as we are not confronted and called to account, few of us change our behavior simply because what we are doing is wrong or hurtful to another. It is typically only when we begin to experience pain, when our internal discontent gnaws inside of us to the point where we can't take our condition, that we are motivated toward finding a solution.

I know, from those occasions where I have counseled someone, that a large degree of desperation is always one of the most hopeful signs that I see that a person will be able to transcend their failure. If a person comes in totally distressed, "I have blown it, I have failed, my life is a mess," I think, "Great. This is really hopeful. We are going to be able to pull this one out of the muck."

But if a person comes in and says, "Hey, everything is fine. Why are you looking at me? Look at her, look at him. What I did wasn't so bad. It was totally explainable by my marriage, by my father or mother, by my circumstance. Leave me alone." I think they haven't experienced enough pain to make the changes that will be necessary in their lives.

You know, one of the reasons why a church exercises discipline is to allow a person to experience the level of pain necessary to transcend failure. It is a merciful thing when God sends pain our way. The pain of guilt and the pain of consequences. And when we experience the pain of failure, if we want to move on through it and overcome it, we must appeal our pain to the Lord.

Chapter 2:2 says, "In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help and you listened to my cry."

When we are in pain, we must appeal our pain to the Lord. We must spread it out before God—all of our guilt, all of our shame, all of our regrets. But what do most people do instead? Let's be honest with each other.

Most of us deny that what we have done was really wrong or we rationalize and say, "Well, you don't understand the situation that I was in. How I was forced to do what I did. I had no choice." The Bible clearly says that people engage in all kinds of dodges and alternatives other than to appeal and to cry out in their pain to God. Some people, the Bible says, use their pain as a defensive wall against God. If you are taking notes, you may want to jot down Revelation 16:8-11. Speaking of the curses that will fall on the earth in the last days, John writes, "The fourth angel poured out his bowl in the sun and the sun was given the power to scorch people by fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast and his kingdom was plunged in darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores."

Some people when they experience distress, whether internal or external, as a result of their failure don't spread their case before God, but instead curse God or bitterly object to God's treatment of them. But I like the way James 5:13 echoes the lesson that we are learning here in Jonah. James 5:13 says, "Is anyone of you in trouble? Let him pray." Acknowledge the value of pain and then pray. Turn toward God rather than run away from him. Appeal your pain to the Lord.

And the third thing that we learn from Jonah is to affirm God's kind intervention. Verse 3, "You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas and the current swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me. You did this Lord."

You see, Jonah, before this intervention by God, was trying to run away from God and he refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty and his right to rule. But now he sees that the pain that he is experiencing has been sent by the Lord. That the Lord is the true ruler.

And when you feel distress, I want to encourage you to affirm God's kind intervention. Intervention is like pain in that I don't know if many of us change without some kind of intervention by either God or a loving person. And I call intervention kind even though for a moment it hurts. In most substance addiction cases, a counselor will advise the family to confront the addict with the truth of their current habits and the consequences of their habits on the family, on the children, on a mate. To gather around that person and say, "Now, look it, here is what you are doing and here is how your behavior is hurting all of us." One of the kindest things that God can do occasionally is to grab us by the scruff of our necks and throw us into the sea. To kindly tell us that what we are doing is not only destroying our own lives, but also the lives of those whom we love.

You say throwing me into the sea and letting me experience great guilt or regrets, causing me to suffer the unhappy consequences of what I have done, that doesn't sound kind. But what if the Father never intervened when we flat out blow it? What if God never, ever threw us into the sea and allowed the consequences of failure to wash over the top of us? Have you ever met someone whose father or mother continually cushioned them from the consequences of their own failures?

I know a young man whose father continually ran interference for him when he was younger. Whenever there was a problem at school, the father would get in the teacher's face and argue that his son was being treated unfairly. He would switch his son from one school to another. Pay enormous private school bills for his failing son. His son wrecked a couple of cars during his teenage years, but no matter. Dad paid to have them repaired. Dad

bought his way into a business with a couple of partners. But his son never showed up at work. The partners eventually threw the son out and Dad lost his entire investment. Dad bought another business for his son and Son blew that too. There are many people who suspect that the son is currently abusing drugs. He is in his early 30's, has no skills, no ambition, utterly lacks self-control.

Would it not have been kinder of his dad at an earlier age to allow the son to be disciplined by consequences? You have friends who are walking away from their marriages. Is it kind of you to cushion the blows or to challenge them with the truth of what they are doing?

Friends, is it not the case that we have defined the word “love,” and instead of giving it a content of something like “Love is whatever God would do in a situation to bring about this individual’s highest and best end,” we say “Love is protecting someone from the experience of any pain whatsoever.” Wrapping them up in pillows so that when they jump off a building, they don’t get hurt too bad.

God loves us enough to discipline us. A number of years ago, I went on vacation with my family. We were going to get on a ferry and this particular ferry charged you a different rate based on the ages of your kids. One of the rates was for children “under five.” Well, I went to the window and said, “Yeah, I have a daughter who is under five.” She was five, but I interpreted “under five” to read “five and under,” because for under five it was free. My wife, Marlene, was standing there and she was saying, “But, Richie, she is five years old.” I said, “Shush up [you know, basically], be quiet.” She was shaking her head—you know, this isn’t right, this is really bad and I was saying that it was no big deal—five and under, under five, it’s all the same thing.

I saved myself \$10.00. We walked from there and the guilt was hanging over me. I am feeling awful. I am trying to block it out and I immediately switched into the rationalization mode. I didn't do anything wrong, everything is OK. Everything is cool. Under 5; 5 and under, same difference, no lie.

We got into the car and I had just saved \$10.00 by lying. I got into the car, turned the car on and the car, literally, blew up. I mean the radiator just exploded the moment I turned the car on. It just blew. The smoke was coming out of the front end of the car and I sat there knowing it was the Lord. He was speaking to my heart and saying, "I am not going to permit my son to be a liar." So I spent an entire day of my vacation getting my car repaired, unbelievably angry—mad at Marlene and mad at myself. It cost me \$150.00 because I had lied.

We neglect, often, to teach our people that God does intervene in our lives through circumstance. Much that occurs to us is the disciplining hand of the Lord. The Lord does love us enough to deal with us. But there are consequences for our sin and God loves us enough to allow us to experience pain.

Well, Jonah affirmed God's kind intervention. And then in dealing with his failure, he admitted his powerlessness to save himself. Let's look at vv. 5-6. We will look at v. 4 in just a minute.

"The engulfing waters threaten me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God."

These verses describe a man who sees himself as completely helpless in the face of his problems. He is overwhelmed by his guilt and by his failure. His conscience is accusing him

and all he can feel and see is life ebbing away and sinking. He is utterly trapped and completely defeated. He is drowning and he is floundering.

But fortunately, Jonah admits it. Instead of saying, “I can somehow figure my way out of the pit that I have fallen into by my ingenuity, my scheming, by manipulating a few people, by lying a little and cutting corners and willpower—I can get myself out of the pit I have fallen into. I can fix all the relationships. I can massage all the bruised feelings. I can overcome this addiction.” Jonah does what every person must do when they blow it big time: admit the powerlessness that they have on their own to fix their problem. On our own, by our own determination, by our own ingenuity, by our own strategies, we cannot heal massive failure.

I am not saying that when we admit powerlessness, we are freed from responsibility. To say “I can’t” doesn’t get you off the hook. You and I are responsible. We are responsible for our failure. We are responsible to get help from God or from someone who can help us, but we need to admit our powerlessness and look to God for the answer to our failure.

We need to address the roots of our failure, v. 7: “When my life was ebbing away I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to your holy temple. Those who cling to the worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

You see you never will successfully overcome serious failure by dealing with it at the surface level. “Yeah, I had an affair, but that is all over now.”

“Yeah, I made some mistakes with my kids.”

“I violently reacted to my mate, but that is over now.”

Jonah says, “My prayer rose to you.” That word “prayer” literally means to “assess” or “to judge.” When we pray we are invoking God as judge or assessor. There is some discussion of the root of that word “prayer”. The root of “tefillah” in many of the

theological word books is traced to a word meaning to “cut one’s self” “to slice oneself open.” As we consider this nuance of judging oneself, assessing oneself, cutting oneself open, you get an emerging picture of true prayer as laying oneself bare before God. Opening oneself up and getting to the root of the problem.

Addiction counselors speak of a moral inventory being taken as the key to breaking addictive habits. The Christian, of course, just doesn’t look inward, but before God, asks himself some very hard questions:

What am I running from by this particular habit?

What memory, what incident, what issue have I been unwilling to face?

What am I running from?

What hurt have I been unwilling to forgive?

What closet is still locked up in my life that hasn’t been opened up and cleaned out?

What relationship—father, mother—has never been honestly assessed?

What am I angry at?

What am I afraid of?

Why am I so selfish or self-centered or full of shame?

Acknowledge the pain that you are experiencing as a gracious gift of God. See, we acknowledge that the pain that has been brought into our lives is a good thing, not a bad thing. Instead of using that as a wall against God, we spread it out before the Lord and tell God that we really are in distress and that we are not doing well. We admit that on our own we can’t figure our way out of our failure. We start probing the roots of how we got to this place. We allow the Holy Spirit to search us. And then we allow God to show us what we are missing. Verse 8, “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

If pain pushes us out of our failure, seeing what we could have, considering what we may be missing pulls us out. I see a push and pull of the power of God in delivering a person from failure. From underneath them, they are pushed by their pain. From above them they are pulled by the thought of what they are missing. Have you considered or journaled and allowed yourself to dream about what you are missing while you stay in failure? This is such a powerful verse. “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

You don't have to live in failure until you die. If you choose to, you are forfeiting a warm relationship with God. You are forfeiting a peace that no one could give you on this earth. You may be forfeiting the power of God flowing through your life or the capacity to hear God. You may be forfeiting a warm relationship with family members or satisfaction in your old age. Or just simply the absence of regrets over the way you have thrown away life, missed opportunities and missed chances. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

I have often used this illustration because it has real power, emotive power, in my own life. But years ago I read the story of a little girl who got her hand stuck in a very expensive Chinese vase at her uncle's house. She was about 3 years old and she stuck her hand into the vase. Her uncle couldn't get it out. They tried to pour oil on her hand and soap it up. She was screaming. Finally, there was nothing to do but break the vase. When they broke the vase, they found that the reason they couldn't get it off her hand was that her hand was clenched in a little fist. She had her hand in a fist. When they opened up her hand they saw that she had a penny in her fist. This expensive vase was broken so that she could keep holding onto her penny. And of course the question that I would ask you is, what is the penny in your hand that you are holding onto? What is the vase that you are allowing to be

smashed so you can hold on to your penny? Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

And now we are being pulled out of the muck, we have to accept the gospel of the second chance. “But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.” And I would want to point you back to v. 4 which says, “I said I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look again to your holy temple.”

You know, as we think about God and we think about our failure, and we get overwhelmed by our guilt, there are really just two alternatives. The first alternative is that God will note everyone of our sins and hold us accountable for all of them. “I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight.’” (verse 4)

The second alternative is that God, knowing our sins, will himself accept responsibility for them and forgive us. Psalm 130:3-4 notes these two opposite alternatives. “If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you.” If it was the case, as many people think, that the way that we come before God is with two big balance pans, and God puts on one side all of the good stuff we have done and on the other side he puts on all of the bad things, for each one of us our failures in thought, word and deed, what we have done and what we have failed to do, would so lopsidedly outweigh our goodness that our punishment would be certain.

But Jonah gets a clear grasp of the gospel. Salvation comes from the Lord. We are in the depths, like Jonah. We have failed. Our guilt overwhelms us. We cry out to God. He hears us and he comes toward us. But he comes toward us not with judgment, but with forgiveness, with mercy. Instead of noting out sins and holding us accountable, God accepts responsibility for the wrong we have done. He says, “Whatever debt you run up, place it on

my tab; charge it to my son Jesus.” We deserve to be banished, instead we received forgiveness. Like the returning Prodigal, we are staggered by the extraordinary mercy of God in wrapping his arms around total failures.

Now parenthetically, in Jonah2:10, as what most of you students of the Bible recognize to be the lovely touch of biblical reality, “And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.” I love the Bible! Because it has verses like this: “The Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.”

So Jonah prayed and confessed, and everything suddenly changed, and Jonah got a hero’s welcome like Douglas MacArthur striding confidently onto the beach saying, “I will return.” The marching band played and crowds cheered, and tons of confetti dropped on Jonah’s head. “Good job, pastor, we really appreciate you. How grateful we all are for the 60-70 hours a week that you work. We love the fact that you regularly miss time with your wife and your children. We appreciate you and understand you, and we never speak poorly of you. We never project onto you our father complexes or all the junk that we got from other churches and other pastors. Pastor, we just treat you as an individual.” No, the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

No hero’s welcome. No, “Boy, are we glad that you turned around and stopped running from your commission.” See, just because you let go of the penny in your hand, it doesn’t mean that you won’t have to go through any more struggles financially, or relationally, or vocationally. Many of us are quite surprised that when we begin to obey, we don’t meet with immediate success. “Well, now that I have turned around and, now God, I am doing the very thing you want me to do. I have stopped running away from you, shouldn’t I see heaven open up and blessings rain on me?”

Maybe. But maybe not. You may just end up on the beach on your face, bruised and humbled, and ready to receive the word of God afresh. That is the position that Jonah was in. He was rolled up on the shore with fish vomit on him. Now he is in the position to receive God's word afresh.

And the reason why I call this the gospel of the second chance is what we read in 3:1-2, "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'"

The fact is, friends, after we have failed, it is really quite possible that people that we care about and people that we love—our own children, our mates, our friends, our church—may not give us a second chance. We may have so treaded on trust or abused a relationship, or because of their own hardness of heart they can't find it in their hearts to allow us to make up our relationship. But with God it is different. God throws the doors open to a second chance with people. It is really important for you that to fully recover from failure that you attack and defeat all thoughts of permanent uselessness. Some people, because of their past failures, have put themselves on the shelf and have essentially said, "Well, that does it in terms of my usefulness to the kingdom of God. I have so blown it that I could never climb back up on the horse. I could never get back in the saddle. O, maybe God will forgive me, but in terms of me doing anything really good for the kingdom, well that potential is now gone forever. I am so marked with the brand on my forehead, 'failure,' that it is over."

Fully recovering from failure says that I am also going to believe not only for my forgiveness, but for my restoration to useful service unto God. Peter needed to hear this. It wasn't enough that Peter was restored in relationship to Jesus. That was the foundation. He needed to accept the gospel. But his restoration wouldn't have been completed until Jesus

said to him, “Well, then, Peter, feed my sheep. I have a place of service for you now. Now that you have processed your failure, I want to employ you again.”

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. God’s word can come to you a second time. The hope of the Christian is that the Lord doesn’t slam the door. That the Christian can be recommissioned, recalled. The hope of you who don’t yet know God is that you can begin life again by receiving Jesus. Today, if you trust in Jesus and receive him into your heart, you can start again with a clean slate. That after a period of discipline and humbling and confession and personal ownership, the word of the Lord would come back to us and reach into our lives again. God’s mercy is so extraordinary.

And you know, it is great to see that the call didn’t change. The word of the Lord that came to Jonah a second time wasn’t different. It wasn’t, “Go now to a different city or do a different task.” It was, “Go to the city of Nineveh and preach the message that I gave to you.” It is exactly, “Do what I told you to do the first time.”

It is really amazing that this matter of simple obedience means so much to the Lord. It is not always so clear to us that obedience on all points means something to God. We feel like if we have obeyed on 999 points out of 1000 that that is OK. That we have done the job right. The Lord keeps circling back on this one point of disobedience, this one place where we have run away.

It is like Helmut Thieleke, the German pastor, once said, “The Lord keeps wanting in through that one door that we have locked.” We open up the windows, the backdoor, the side-door, the front door, and the Lord keeps knocking on the one that we have bolted. We keep saying, “Lord, you can come into my life in a million ways. Come through the roof. Come down the chimney. Climb in the basement window. You can enter my life and grab hold of me and enter my life through a dozen ways.”

And the Lord says, “But I want to enter through this one door.” And so he brings Jonah back to that one point of obedience. God will always circle back on that first point of obedience with us. This one thing. The one penny we are grasping. The one point of failure we feel most guilty about.