
Acting close to God; *another distinguishing feature of a defecting heart*

Jonah 2

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Introduction

Identified...by the back of my head...huh?

A few hours after our morning service last week I went to Kroger's to stroll up and down the 15 isles grocery shopping for my family. With a cup of Verona in hand and clothed in casual attire I stood at the produce section enjoying anonymity. Like an arrow shot from afar, my serenity was pierced by a female voice behind me. "Dan Turner" I heard. I turned and there she was...Michelle Cooper. "Hey my sister" I said with great joy, "what's up". She retorted, "I thought that was you. I could tell by the back of your head"... huh, spotted by a distinguishing feature like "the back of my head" – and yet, it is good to be spotted and called out of obscurity into relationship by one who loves and cares and enjoys the best – even if one is identified by a distinguishing feature that is not altogether lovely.

Isn't this somewhat like what the Lord does in our lives? He gets our attention, turns us around and engages us in relationship. And he does so by noticing and drawing our attention to a distinguishing feature that is not altogether lovely. We see this happening all through the book of Jonah.

We continue this morning in our series called **2 hearts 1 story** as we study together the book of Jonah. Last week we noticed chapter one and how the narrative unfolds two hearts – Jonah's defecting heart (who represents God's chosen people) and the LORD's gracious heart (who brings back His chosen people).

In this book you will see Jonah. You notice that something is not quite right with him. The reason for this is simple. He has a defecting heart – a heart that strays from the Lord.

This type of heart is seen by its distinguishing features.

Last week we noticed it as *Running from God* (choosing a path that leads to death to escape the road that leads to life)

Today we are confronted with a distinguishing feature of heart defect known as – *Acting close to God* Now what do I mean by "acting close to God"? Exposing in our lives things like hypocrisy, pretense, insincerity, two-facedness is the aim of today's message. But it will not end there. Identifying a demonstration of a going astray heart is not the end of the LORD's ministry. Turning us around and closing with us so that we are rescued and brought back to Him is gospel ministry. And that is what we pray will happen today. Let's pray to this end. -----

Open your Bibles and turn with me to Jonah chapter 2. This section serves as a microscope magnifying Jonah's pre-fish experience in the sea. What is Jonah's heart like? Is he right with God? Does he desire both the LORD's great commission and his good company? What this prayerful song indicates is what we will be exploring today. Are we to view this episode in chapter 2 as some form of repentance toward God while (you know) still seeing more growth needed in Jonah? From this prayer are we to conclude that Jonah initiates a return to God as he "comes to his senses" and realizes his need of mercy? Are we to interpret his expulsion onto dry ground as the reward given to one who draws near to God? Or is there something else that is the point and needs to be pressed upon our hearts?

Acting close to God

v1-10

In a fairly lengthy freeze frame, the storyline of Jonah pauses for its readers to hear Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving. This "thanksgiving song" ascends from the belly of the fish. We hear for the first time Jonah talking about his experience. He elaborates his trauma in the sea. And he does so through poetry.

A suspicious contrition

v1-7

Here we see that ugly feature of a defecting heart as *acting close to God*. And we see this by first noticing *a suspicious contrition*. Picking up where we left off last week we come to the poetry section of chapter two. Follow along as I read v1-7.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me, weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit; O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away I remembered the LORD and my prayer came to you into your holy temple

I love poetry. Poetry sings. Poetry is beautiful. Poetry is an attractive use of language. And yet something is not right in chapter two. The one who is retelling the story has already characterized Jonah in chapter one as a traitor. He is running from his calling. He is attempting to get away from the great commission of the Lord. He is defecting from God's command. And so, when we hear his contrition found in vv.1-7 we are to be a bit suspicious.

The suspicion increases as we think about what he said. For example, notice verse 3. Jonah attributes his life-threatening situation to the LORD's doing. "You cast me into the deep". I suppose one could say that ultimately the LORD did through his providence cast him into the sea. But 1:12 clearly shows Jonah behind his awful situation. The consequences of his behavior are owing to him...not the LORD!

Also our suspicion increases as we read on and come to Jonah's assessment of why he is away from the presence of the LORD. Chapter one makes clear that Jonah desired to flee

from the presence of the LORD. Now in this questionable contrition he says that it was the LORD who drove him away from his presence. I'm beginning to wonder about this "song of thanksgiving". I'm becoming unsure as to why Jonah's contrition in vv.5-7 has him looking so virtuous. He sounds so right and religious by quoting many passages from the Psalms. Yet, he has not taken any responsibility for his actions. He doesn't seem to feel sadness over his sin. Could it be that the writer wants us to see another aspect of Jonah's heart and abhor what we see? Could it be that the writer wants us to spot a distinguishing feature of a drifting heart – lips that are close to the Lord while the heart is far from the Lord? Could it be that He wants us to see this characteristic not just in Jonah?

How about us? Do we ever pretend that we are better than we are? Do we act close to God using charming pious words and then hang up the phone to yell at our child who impatiently wanted our attention?

Do you sing the wonderful hymns and songs of a Sunday morning with a heart still bitter over what happened before you came to church?

I recall pastoring another church one Sunday. Our children were small. The difficulty keeping them quietly in the chairs while attempting to focus on the Lord was increasing. I thought that since I was the preacher Lisa should be the only one distracted in helping the kids. It was getting more difficult for her. She asked me to help. I gave her the scowl and proceeded to "help". Then it was my turn to get up front to lead people to the Lord. Oh, how my lips were close to the Lord while my heart was far from the Lord.

Looking religious with scrubbed up language while the heart is far from the LORD will lead in one of two directions. Either people will applaud your performance and you will feel superior or people will not applaud your performance and you will feel crushed – either way you remain far from the LORD. You are counting on something other than the Lord's provision for the Lord's acceptance. Your standard is self-made. You may look the part but there is no transforming joy or power. You need to be rescued from a defecting heart. You need repentance that turns you to the Christ. You need the gospel to recapture your mind.

This starts when we recognize the symptoms of a heart defect – acting close to God .

A sickening confession

v8-10

Making our way down through the poem we come to Jonah's confession..Listen in as I read v8-10.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD. And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

In v.8 we come to good theology. "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope in steadfast love". That is spot on! That is good counsel. I have use this statement in counseling sessions more than once. But when we reach verse 9, we find contrast. We find Jonah thinking that he is the opposite of verse 8. "But I" sounds so self-righteous as if verse eight

didn't apply to him. The irony of this confession is that we do see this application in chapter one but it is not with Jonah. We see the sailors doing this in 1:16. They offer sacrifice and make vows to the LORD. We do not see a hint of Jonah's sacrifice. We have not heard him make any vows. In fact, this section that is to be his confession talks nothing about his repentance, his sin, his consequences, his remorse, his renewed participation in the Lord's commission – nothing. His words ring hollow and his ways suggest one thing – inauthenticity. This contrition and this confession, according to verse 10, were nauseating. Being evicted from his gastric haven the fish vomited out Jonah.

What we've seen thus far is as queasy as a pile of vomit. Jonah is not portrayed as a repentant follower of God. He is not here for the reader to congratulate. In this freeze frame, he is placed under the microscope magnifying a heart defecting from the Lord. Can you see it? Do you detect it in Jonah? What we are to see is that a heart far from the Lord can actually sound pious. A heart drifting from God can look religious and a bit repentant. But as Isaiah in the 8th century BC said of God's people, "they honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me".

Awful?...yes! But we dare not miss the other heart out in the open in this scene. Even though Jonah attempted to avoid the Lord's commission either through drowning (chapter one) or digestion (chapter two), God had other plans. Due to the LORD's allegiance to His own mission/fame and His mercy for His own people He aims the fish. He pointed the fish toward dry land to save Jonah and put him back in the mission we read about in chapter one.

What is being exposed thus far are two hearts. Jonah's wish and the LORD's will. Jonah demonstrates disobedience. The LORD demonstrates patience and persistence. Jonah says one thing but does another. The LORD has pity upon such a pathetic prophet.

The contrasts between these two hearts are to be working on our own hearts. Can you see traces of Jonah-likeness in your heart? Do you believe that the LORD treats you not as your sins deserve? He is patient and demonstrates pity for those who are out of step, who are rebellious, whose self-righteousness is sickening.

Conclusion

Notice the second part of v6 and the change in direction. From 1:3 up to this verse we see Jonah going in but one direction – DOWN. Now at this pivotal point we are introduced to the opposite direction – UP.

Reversing the direction of hypocrisy is caused not by the hypocrite but by the LORD.

How can you tell if God is working on you now?

This morning, you may be here frightened but no one knows this. You do not want people to know who you are. You dress nicely. Your hair is kept. You respond to others with your learned Christian pleasantries. You are kind to people around you. Your good nature remarks keep people thinking one thing while inside you are another thing. You sang the songs this morning. You bowed your head when we prayed. Your reputation goes before you as a helper.

But your heart has cooled off in its pursuit of God. And you do not know what to do...accept do again what you've done all along – fake it. Keeping your lips close to God while your heart is far from God is a serious matter. It is characteristic of a defecting heart. Oh, beloved, the Lord has brought you in this auditorium today for His reasons. Could it be that He is recapturing you by showing you your defecting heart? You now know you are caught. You now know the gig is up. He sees you. He knows you. And now you believe He is tracking you down today.

Approximately 800 years after Jonah Jesus was talking with hypocrites in Matt.12. He said something to these people who acted close to God while their hearts were far from God. Something all of us need to be wowed by. Listen to the Christ.

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”

Jonah came forth from his 3 days/3 nights smelling like vomit with digestive juices dripping from his hair. Jesus burst forth from his 3 days/ 3 nights in glorious attire. Jonah had little to say. Listen to what Jesus had to say on that glorious morning of his resurrection.

“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, **“I have seen the Lord”**—*

(John 20:1-18 ESV)

The One who was hurled into the sea of God's wrath on our behalf, the One who went to the cross and absorbed the punishment of our sins, the One who died and was placed in the belly of the earth, the One who could not be held in the death grip but was resurrected and lives forevermore, this One (our only hope and joy) calls out our personal name. He tells us through His accomplished work on the Cross that we are safe from the punishment due our sins. He tells us by His resurrection that we are accepted by the Holy one of the universe – no more doubting – no more pretending – no more looking to self for safety. He has sent His Spirit to enable us to now do what Mary did – cling with affection to Him. This is gospel. This is grace. This is our only hope. Turn today from acting close to God. Turn today to the God who is the Christ who is close to us. Trust and rest in His accomplished work and worth – Amen.



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