

WEEK OF JUNE 12, 2022

LESSON AIM: **Return to the Lord, for he is gracious and compassionate.**

UNIT: Early Minor Prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Jonah)

THEME: Where Are You?

LESSON TEXT: Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7; 3:5-10; Joel 2:12-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezekiel 18:22-23; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Acts 26:20

STUDY

RETURN TO ME

BY MARK SCOTT

The little town of Humboldt, Kansas, annually hosts the only uniquely Bible parade in America. It is held on the first weekend of October (this year it's on October 1). For years they have had Jonah's whale (great fish) as a float in the parade. The whale sprays water from its blowhole onto the crowd as it makes its way along the parade route.

People are enthusiastic about this "whale of a tale" in the book of Jonah. But as G. Campbell Morgan reminded us, only 3 verses in the book are about the great fish while 48 verses are about the great God.

One thing is for sure: Jonah was on the run. In chapter 1 he ran "from" God. In chapter 2 he ran "to" God. In chapter 3 he ran "with" God. And in chapter 4 he ran "counter" to God. God always desires for us to run to him in full repentance. Textual selections from Jonah 1–2 and Joel 2 underline our need to return to God.

Jonah's Return

Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7

Jonah found repentance in the belly of the fish. While people and animals have been found to survive in the bellies of great fish, Jonah's survival for three days and nights might have been miraculous. Sometime after the experience (maybe even when he returned to Israel), he penned his prayer from when he was in the bowels of the fish.

There was no sugarcoating his situation. Jonah called out to God in his *distress* (trouble or affliction). Reflecting typical Jewish thought, Jonah acknowledged that the depths of the sea were demonic and away from God. He felt as though he was in the *realm of the dead*. Jonah was confident God heard him, but he was conscious he was in the *very heart of the seas* with swirling currents and waves and breakers sweeping over him. Jonah knew his situation was dire—i.e., *engulfing waters, deep, and seaweed*—but he was confident he would yet see the temple again (Jonah 2:4). He even was confident he was experiencing the *roots of the mountains*.

Jonah's return to God was evident in the phrase, "*But you, Lord my God.*" He knew God could (and did) bring him up from the *pit* (ditch or place of corruption). His life had been *ebbing away* (fainting), but he was confident God answered prayer from his *holy temple* (the symbolic place of God's presence on earth) and that

there was a difference between God's people and other people (vv. 8-10).

The King's Return

Jonah 3:5-10

After Jonah was spit out onto dry land (U.S. Senate Chaplain Dr. Barry Black says that even a great fish cannot stand a bellyaching preacher), he went to Nineveh. Can you imagine how emaciated he must have looked? Jesus said that Jonah himself was a sign (Matthew 12:39). He walked through the city and pronounced his prophecy of destruction, which would come in 40 days (Jonah 3:1-3).

It must have been shocking to Jonah when the people of Nineveh (from the king on down) repented. In fact, their repentance showed up in fasting and sackcloth. The king even put out a *decree* (judgment) including people and animals. It's hard to say how much the pagan king understood what was involved in repenting to Yahweh. But he did so personally and led his people to do the same. God was so impressed that he *relented* (comforted) and did not destroy them—it is a good example of conditional prophecy (i.e., when judgment is declared but people repent, that condition of repentance reverses the judgment of God).

Israel's Return

Joel 2:12-17

Neither Jonah nor Nineveh had long-term repentance. Jonah would fail again within days, and Nineveh's repentance would last only around 100 years (see the book of Nahum). True and long-term repentance must go beyond skin deep. This is what the prophet Joel urged. A storm and a fish got Jonah's attention. The message of judgment got the king of Nineveh's attention. A locust plague (and drought) would get Israel's attention.

Fasting, sackcloth, and weeping are all evidences of repentance. But the real evidence is what takes place in the human heart. So, Joel said, "*Rend your heart.*" Joel promised that God would be *gracious and compassionate*. God would bless the people if they would just turn to him. But it would take everyone (*people, elders, children—even infants, bridegrooms and brides, as well as priests*). Our returning to God ensures that God's name is not misrepresented among the nations of the earth. ■

APPLICATION

GREAT COMEBACKS

BY DAVID FAUST

Comebacks capture our imagination. Abraham Lincoln suffered several defeats at the ballot box before he was elected president. In 1915 Winston Churchill said, "I am finished," after leading a disastrous naval campaign, but decades later as England's prime minister he inspired the nation to persevere against the Nazi war machine. H.B. Reese lost his job working as a dairyman for the Hershey Company in Pennsylvania, then formed his own candy company (which failed), but ultimately he created a unique way of combining chocolate and peanut butter for his Reese's Cups—one of the sweetest comeback stories of all time.

Football fans recall the New England Patriots' epic come-from-behind victory over the Atlanta Falcons in the 2017 Super Bowl, roaring back from 25 points behind to win 34-28. On June 29, 1952, baseball's Chicago Cubs trailed the Cincinnati Reds, 8-2, with two outs and no runners on base in the top of the ninth. However, the next nine batters all reached base safely, pushing across seven runs, and the Cubs won the game 9-8.

At age 45, George Foreman returned to boxing after a five-year retirement and regained the world heavyweight title. In 1993, Monica Seles was the top female tennis player in the world when she was stabbed by a disturbed fan who obsessively supported a rival tennis player. She recovered enough to compete in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, then won a bronze medal in 2000 in Sydney. When Michael Jordan was a sophomore in high school, a basketball coach assigned him to the junior varsity team instead of the varsity, bypassing him in favor of a taller player, but eventually Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to three consecutive NBA titles. Surfer Bethany Hamilton lost an arm in a shark attack, but she returned to surfing and won the 2004 ESPY Award for Best Comeback Athlete.

Biblical Comebacks

You can find great comeback stories in the Bible. Joseph was sold into slavery, his father gave him up for dead, and

false accusations landed him in prison, but eventually he became one of Pharaoh's top officials. After 40 years of obscurity in the desert, Moses returned to Egypt and led the Hebrews to freedom. Job lost his health, wealth, and children, but in time God restored his prosperity and multiplied his blessings.

Jonah looked like a goner when he sank into the sea, but three days later he was back on land and heading toward Nineveh to preach God's Word. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, but 70 years later the Jews came back from captivity and rebuilt the Holy City.

When Jesus said, "It is finished," his followers thought their dreams were dying with him. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel," lamented the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:21). What a great comeback it was when Jesus emerged alive from the tomb! The Lord predicted another great comeback when he said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3).

Time to Return

The prophets often proclaimed bad news, but their messages also contained encouragement and hope. Joel urged, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate" (Joel 2:13).

Have you drifted away from the Lord? Have you neglected God, separated yourself from the church, and allowed your faith to wane? It's not too late.

Come back.

Personal Challenge: Do you know someone who has turned a setback into a comeback? If so, what have you learned from them about faith and perseverance? In what area of your own life do you need to "return to the Lord" (Joel 2:13)? ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICAH ODOR

1. When you think of a major turnaround, what do you think of? It could be from a favorite movie or book, a favorite sports team, a business, or almost anything else.
2. Last week we discussed that nothing is out of God's view or out of his reach. How did you demonstrate that this week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Jonah 2:1-3, 5-7** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask the same two people to each read **Jonah 3:5-10**. Repeat the process with **Joel 2:12-17**.

3. How would you characterize Jonah's prayers from inside the fish? Focus on the images, emotions, and decisions that came up:
 - What did you feel as you read the prayers?
 - What did it remind you of?
4. What is the major turning point in Jonah 3:5-10, and why would it be a surprise to its original readers?
5. What parts of the king's proclamation in verses 7-9 could apply to us today? What parts would not?
6. What can we learn about God from this week's passage?
7. What can we learn about ourselves or others?
8. Sometimes change seems impossible. We're on a path we think we'll never leave; we can't pick a new direction. But these passages show that's not the case. What "turning points" in your walk with God is he currently offering you?
9. Based on what we've discussed, what are you doing well?
10. Based on what we've discussed, what could you do differently in obeying God this week?
11. Who needs to hear this story, and how will you tell them?
12. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Jonah 3:10–4:11** and **Joel 2:18-27** as we continue our study of the Early Minor Prophets. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **■**