

LOOK INSIDE, TELL THE TRUTH. +++

PASTOR ZACH ZEHNDER

Well, good morning, King of Kings. It's good to be back with you. We're going to jump into one of my favorite verses in Jonah, some new stuff for today, Jonah chapter 2, verse 1. It says from inside the fish, Jonah prayed, hang on, to the Lord, his God, sorry. It's been a long week. My wife's out of town this weekend. I'm watching an extra dog and I'm like, what is going on in my world that I'm the primary caretaker of two dogs this weekend? Can we start over? We did Jonah 2 last week. We're in Jonah chapter 3. Would you allow me a chance to start over? Is that okay? All right. So let's cut the stream. Let's start over on the count of three. Let me do this again. Three, two, one.

Well, good morning, King of Kings. How are we doing today? All right. I want to welcome in Fremont to Northwest Omaha. We are in one of my favorite verses to start. It's Jonah chapter 3, verse 1. And here's what it says. It says, then the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Everybody say a second time, a second time, a second chance. It's nice sometimes every now and then to get another chance, isn't it? Yeah. But you may be wondering, wait, was that an accident? Or did Pastor Zach do that on purpose to illustrate a point of God that he is going to come back to time and time and time again today? We'll never know, I guess. But welcome back to Sinners Anonymous, our six-week support group, where we are looking deep into the story of Jonah, and at the same time doing a look at the 12 steps made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous of recovery.

We have replaced one word of the 12 steps, alcohol, with the word sin, because while not all of us are alcoholics, we are all sinners. And in these 12 steps, we're seeing that they're biblical principles that help us live as greater disciples and are really good steps and tools for us to conquer, defeat, and battle the sin that's in our life. Amen? So if you show up to a recovery group, there's lots of reading out loud. In fact, they'll read every step every week. But let's, for our purposes, get back into the message by reading steps one through three together, which is where we've been the last two weeks. So let's see number one, and let's read that together.

We admitted we were powerless over sin, that our lives had become unmanageable. Step number two, we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. And step number three, we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. A simple way to remember where we've been, you remember maybe week one, if you were here, we had this posture of powerlessness that we could best describe in two words. You remember what those words are? I can't. But we, step two, know who that higher power is. He has a name and his name is Jesus. So we said, well, I can't, Jesus can. And step three, so I surrender.

Today we're going to look at what does surrendering actually look like? It's one thing to make a decision to turn our will and our lives. That's the surrender, but surrender is an ongoing process. What's that going to look like? So we're going to jump back into Jonah. So far we've learned these three lessons from Jonah from arguably the worst Airbnb in history. One star review, it's really smelly and violent because we left Jonah as he was vomited onto dry land. Do you remember that? One of the things I hate most in this world to do is to vomit. Just being totally out of control of my body and

likely on the bathroom tile floor with my head on the porcelain. No, thank you. But can you imagine, would you like to imagine with me what it must have been like to be the vomit? That's what Jonah was. Cannot imagine.

And we're not going to get that deep into it because I actually want to move somewhere today that's meaningful. Except to think that probably after he was spewed violently onto the dry land, at a minimum, I'm thinking Jonah must have thought, I'd rather not go through that again. Something needs to change. And so we're going to see what that change is going to look like in Jonah's story today. I am really grateful that we worship a God of another chance. You need to hear that over and over and over again in your life. Some of you don't believe it and struggle to believe it that when you blow it, when you make it just a bad, a terrible decision, when you went left, even though you should have gone right, when you've wasted days and weeks and months and seasons and years, when you feel like my life is a mess, you need to hear that God is here to meet you with another chance. He is the God of another chance, amen?

And we need that. Sometimes that's harder for us to wrap our minds around. It's hard enough to wrap our minds around the fact that God could forgive me, but I have heard people say, and I have thought myself at times, well, fine, I understand that God forgives me, but I doubt he could ever use me. God loves me, but come on, I blew the chance that he gave me that call he had on my life. I could never go back to something like that again. And yet we're going to see today that this is the character of God to give you another chance. And oftentimes to give you the same chance that you once said no to is often where God's grace meets you and calls you up out of, and that's going to be where it is with Jonah.

Because remember, we said that God didn't just rescue Jonah from something, he rescued Jonah for something. The calling is still there. So what's his call? Let's find out in verse two, go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. Hang on, doesn't that sound familiar? If you were here a couple of weeks ago, that was the same call he gave Jonah in chapter one. I think it's fascinating to see that God didn't look on this experiment with ended with fish vomit and say, Hey, I actually had that call and I saw that didn't really work out. And so this time I'm going to lower my expectations, Jonah, because we know how that worked out. But I love the fact that God calls Jonah up to the very same thing that Jonah once said no to.

Interesting, because some of you are living with the lie that that thing that God called you to is no longer available for you because of what you've done. God watched Jonah get spit out of a fish and that wasn't enough for God to say, I'm lowering my expectations. Verse three tells us this beautiful verse that Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and he went to Nineveh finally, right? Chapter one. God said, go, Jonah said, no. Chapter three, God says, go. And Jonah goes, he obeyed, he had another chance. And I think we should celebrate that. That's progress. Sometimes in church, we don't know how to celebrate progress and sometimes it feels like we kind of need to wait until the total transformation or everything is complete in order to celebrate. And by doing that, we miss opportunities to celebrate.

One of the things I love about recovery communities is they've got so many slogans. And one of the slogans that's my favorite is progress, not perfection. They celebrate progress. They celebrate tiny decisions that are a big deal. So they celebrate one day sober. You know what that's worth? Celebrating because it's progress. One honest conversation where in the past you might've hidden something, progress. Showing up to a meeting, it's life or death for those in recovery communities. And so just

showing up, progress, not perfection. In fact, the Alcoholic Anonymous and all the anonymous groups give chips and tokens. And so you get one as a newcomer and you get one when you're 30 days and 60 days and 90 days and a year sober. So much so now that apps, right, really celebrate the progress, the bat, you win badges and awards if you keep showing up, they've been doing that forever, progress, not perfection.

So Jonah went, but, and this is a really important, but don't confuse progress with completion. You need to hear that sometimes as we live our lives as disciples of Jesus, and as we battle sin in our life, and as we work towards healing and recovery and freedom, you need to hear that, that God can use you before he's finished with you. In fact, if we just waited for God to finish, for us to be complete, you know, who would never get used in God's kingdom, you and me, by the way, none of us, God works through unfinished people, progress, not perfection. Jonah obeyed and he went. If we're just waiting for everything to get right, we wouldn't be used.

So as a pastor, there's many Sundays that I come and I am really just excited to preach. Maybe had a really good week, maybe like the message and it's just a lot of fun. And then every now and then there's a Sunday where I don't know, maybe I'm not feeling well, maybe I had a bad week, maybe I'm just not into the message that I have and I'll preach it. And it's kind of funny how sometimes even on those weeks, someone will come up to me afterwards and say, Zach, that was exactly what I needed to hear. And I'll be like, really? Because I know the one that said it to you wasn't even into it. And that's what she liked. There's a sign that we have backstage right before we get onto stage. And I run into this sign every week, right at rehearsal. And it says, it is a privilege to be on stage. Thank God. Thank God for choosing. Thank you, God, for choosing me. And most of the times I'm like, yes, thank you. And there's some weeks I'm like, eh, really me? And God still uses imperfect, unfinished people.

And we can't always measure fruitfulness around us as health inside of us. As we work towards defeating sin and being the disciple God's called us to be, you just need to hear this language over and over and over that this walk with God, it's not a destination you reach where it's going to be complete and perfect and finished. It's a journey we're on until Jesus comes back. And so what do we celebrate? Progress, not perfection. And Jonah is about to be exhibit A in this. Jonah chapter three, verse three, we read the part where he obeyed and he went to Nineveh. Then it says, now Nineveh was a very large city and it took three days to go through it. And again, anchoring those of you who maybe don't understand who the Ninevites were and why he might've not gone in the first chapter. These were not just like semi-annoying people that you try to avoid when you see them coming. The Ninevites were bitter enemies that wanted to kill Jonah and his people.

The Assyrians, Nineveh was a city in Assyria and the Assyrians were taking over. And there's actually lots of language, even Assyrian Kings have written things and history books have shown just how awful and brutal and torturous the Assyrians were. One King talked about an experience where they went in and destroyed an entire city and they killed all of these soldiers and they decapitated the soldiers' heads and they stacked up all of these decapitated heads into a large pile. And it wasn't like a, it wasn't like, it was a threat to like, Hey, you want to come against Assyria? Well, then here's what you're going to face. And that was the people that was against Jonah. They were particularly against the Northern kingdom of Israel where Jonah lived and prophesied. So you can understand, can you not, you can have a little sympathy for why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. I've argued that we've run from far less.

I think this goes down as one of the hardest assignments for a human in the old Testament. God essentially is telling Jonah, Jonah, I want you to go to the people that are trying to kill you, that you think deserve my judgment. And I want you to give them my mercy. Oh. But finally Jonah goes, now, if you've read the rest of Jonah, you know, something, here's what you know, Jonah's feet move there, but his heart is still not there. But again, his feet are moving in the right direction, progress, not perfection.

Verse four, Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Did you know you just preached a whole sermon right there, eight English words, five Hebrew words. One of my least favorite Bible verses in all the Bible, because, well, I try a lot harder than that. This is a mailed in sermon. Is it not? I mean, gosh, I go through the process. Part of my process. I'll let you in on it. I research, I study, I start writing things down, I start editing it. I get to more than 4,000 words, 4,000, this guy did eight in English. I work on introductions and transitions and illustrations and applications. I try to do something funny in there somewhere to get you to laugh, but ensure that I don't take the credit or too much because I want to make sure that Jesus is the hero. And so I got to tell you about his grace in a new way, but also give you something that practically will work for your Monday and Tuesday and the rest of the week. I then review it with a team. I make some changes. I speak it out loud at least four times. And at the very end of that, I spend a few minutes in silence with the Lord, asking himself this question, God, okay, I've put in the work, but what do the people really need to hear? What are the people really need to hear? And then I deliver the sermon. This guy, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Can you imagine if that was a sermon that I gave to you? Can you imagine?

Maybe you're excited because you got family and friends in town. You've been talking up your church. Come to King of Kings. You're going to love it. We're in a great series right now. It's going to be awesome. And so you get everybody dressed up, everybody ready. The kids are there. You're driving here. Everything's happening. It's fun. You get in the parking lot. You see the greeters at one of our campuses. You come in. It's a really inviting atmosphere. You've got that countdown video where Greg's talking about, we give because God gave first and we love. And that's how he says it. We love Jesus. I know that it's like, that's my cue. I better be ready. The church is starting and we count down and it's three, two, one. And I just all of a sudden walk up, I turn my microphone on and I say, 40 more days and Nebraska will be destroyed. Like come on, you'd be so mad. That wouldn't work.

You can see why I'm mad, right? I know you're not all preachers, but it'd be like if you prepared this epic presentation and you were going up against one other person and they're going to choose one and you put all this time in, all these PowerPoint slides, cool graphics. You got an amazing and you spend an hour and you were slaying it and you were given everything that you got. It had been through revision and it's like the answer and you know, it's good. And then this other guy comes into the room at the end, the other guy pitching it and he smells like fish. He's got a bad attitude and he's got five words written on a post-it note and they're not even spelled correctly and like, we're going with that guy. Come on. Seriously. What a joke of a sermon.

Now I don't know if that's the whole sermon. Maybe that's the cliff notes. Maybe it's a summary. It does appear like he went through it over and over and over again because he preached for three days and maybe when he was saying that it's not the most warm message, but maybe someone asked him, so can you tell me more? And then maybe Jonah gave some grace. I'm just saying he's not going to win any preaching awards. There's no great illustration. There's no three points. There's no clever acronym

or alliteration. There's no invitation and there's no worship team coming back up with six minutes to go to put the pads on just at the right minute. You don't even tell them what to do. Forty more days and you are toast. Mails it in and the reason why it's so bothersome is because it's connected to the next four words in the next verse. The Ninevites believed God. What? Come on. Seriously.

This is a bigger miracle than maybe even the fish. You preach a lackluster sermon with a lackluster attitude and you got a whole evil city that's changing their beliefs and now believing in God seriously. How do you get that kind of outcome? That's not fair, God, and it's a great reminder to me and to you, not just to those of us in ministry that get the chance to preach, but to you as well, that as we talk about change and where the power is, the power is ultimately not in Jonah and his sermon. The power in change is always God. It's not because he preached a quality sermon or a lack of a quality of sermon. The power is God.

We were serving this week as a staff at Open Door Mission as part of CityServe and one of the programs at Open Door Mission is a men's recovery program and they do a 12-week program. And the guy was talking to us about it and said it's 12 weeks and then the way they measure success in recovery communities largely is, are you sober a year later? And their statistics for success are 82% of the guys that go through the program a year later are sober. Isn't that cool? And then he compared it to some statewide things, programs, and he said it's about four times as likely or as high, four times higher. And he said, what's crazy is the programs aren't altogether that much different, except there's one thing that's different at Open Door Mission than the statewide run stuff. You know what it is? Jesus. The power in change is Jesus.

And I love that as a pastor because it takes even pressure off of me and it means I can have a good week or a bad week. I can have a good attitude or a bad attitude, but as long as we open up God's word, his word works. That's what Isaiah 55, 11 has. It says, so is my word that comes out of my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. And so I am a vessel and I matter far less than what God's word is because God's word works.

But this shows me a truth, not just for preachers, shows me a truth for you too, that God can do extraordinary things through ordinary, imperfect. And I would add the word unfinished people. And that's beautiful for you because God can give you another chance after chance, after chance. So let's move into steps four and five. Let's read step four together. Step four says we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Now I'll be real with you. This is where some of you've been tracking the last couple of weeks. It's great. I love this. This is where it's going to get really challenging. In fact, in recovery communities, they typically will say step four and step nine are the most challenging. It makes sense, right? If you think about where we've been in the first three steps, I can't, Jesus can. So I surrender. It's mostly an internal thing that requires a decision, but now we're going to be working it out and there's some real work to do. And step four, if I boil it down into two words, is these two words, look inside.

And that's sometimes the last place we want to look. As humans, we actually like looking around at others. Some of us have a searching and fearless moral inventory of other people. Maybe it's your spouse or your kids or your boss. Some of you are like, pastor, how long do you have? I've actually already made a searching, fearless, moral inventory of my mother-in-law, of the politicians in

Washington, DC. I know how to fix it. We're really good. Jesus actually combated this in the Sermon on the Mount, and he gives us an incredible analogy that sometimes we're really good at noticing the speck in somebody else's eye, which how deeply into their eyes do you have to look to see a speck? While at the same time, we got a plank out of our own. What? So this is like, no, I got to, I got to look inside.

What if I don't like what I find inside? What if, what if I realized that I couldn't, I shouldn't be blaming as many people as I ought to. And I maybe am the reason things are a mess. I like those words though, searching. It's not superficial. We're going to go deep. I like that fearless because it is scary. Socrates one time said the unexamined life is not worth living. And counselors will tell you that self-examination though is painful. And so this is the part of the steps where a lot of you are like, cool, I was good with the first three and I'm bowing out now. That's what they found. This is a really challenging step.

I love the metaphor that John Ortberg gives about a friend whose motto is, I'd rather be dead than cold. And he starts talking about her and the way she gets into swimming pools. And there's really two different approaches, right? There's the one approach where you just jump in and, and, and you're in. And the other approach he calls the half measures approach. You know what I'm talking about? Where you kind of dip your toes in a little bit and then you put your ankle in and then you inch by inch, get lower and lower and lower. And I like the way Ortberg says that he says, why would you do it that way? Why would you do it that way? Come on, let's be real. Half in, half out, half warm, half cold, half wet, half dry, and fully miserable. He says, be that you would just dive in and actually the thing that you're fighting, you will actually see that it supports you and you can start to swim and even float and gosh, it might even turn into being comfortable if you just go all the way in.

Sometimes we want to half measure our way to being a disciple of Jesus. And I like the way CS Lewis says it. He says, no half measures are any good. In recovery circles, in the big books of Alcoholics Anonymous, they would actually combat this because they tried, they tried other ways. And here's what they ended up saying. We thought we could find an easier, softer way, but we could not. Half measures availed us nothing. And so my point, look inside, but really look inside. It's not easy. It's uncomfortable. Self-examination is painful.

Actually discovered through a counselor this year that when I'm not feeling like loved or affirmed, especially from people that are close to me, that when they criticize me or question me or challenge me, a lot of times what I do is I will, I will look like I'm listening and I will say nothing on the outside, but on the inside of my head, I will be, I will be thinking of the 10 reasons they're wrong and the 10 reasons I'm right. And I will keep replaying that after the argument as well. And what I found is that I can far too quickly jump to being a victim in my own story. And I don't like that sort of victim mentality that can come upon me because sometimes what the person on the other side is trying to tell me is true and I should receive it for what it is and I shouldn't get combative and I shouldn't make myself out to be a victim.

So when I was talking about this with a counselor, he gave me a homework assignment and it was actually very similar to step four. He said, Zach, I want you to sit for two hours by yourself. No phone, no Bible, no music, no clock, two hours. I want you to take a pen and a pad of paper. And for two hours, I want you to write all of the ways in which you failed and how you've made life challenging for the people around you. And I said, I'm paying you for this. Hang on a second here. That sounds painful. And I didn't want to do it, but I relented and my heart wasn't in it, but my feet were moving there. It's

like, fine, I'll do it. And so I went to a local cigar shop actually, and so I was like, how am I going to tell the time? And so I bought literally the biggest and fattest cigar I could find in this humidor. And I was like, if I smoke it slowly, like one inch of ash, it'll be about 30 minutes. I'm not saying you should do this, this is what I did. And for two hours, I just wrote all the ways I'd failed, how that was challenging, all the decisions I'd made.

And sometimes, gosh, sometimes even a good decision still ended up kind of hurting those around me or making life chaotic. I discovered that because of sort of my frantic, inconsistent nature with work and kind of always doing a lot of different things, that actually for the ones closest to me, I've made it hard to be around. That was hard. It was two really hard hours. The first hour, things came pretty quickly. The second hour, not as quickly, but deeper. And I actually started writing things and remembering things that I'd never thought about before. And I found this exercise to be one of the most meaningful and important things I've done all year. And after writing them down, I decided to tell someone, and that's step five.

Let's say these words together, admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs. I confessed it. I owned it. And then I confessed it to someone else. And really, again, I just want to show you how biblical these principles are. James 5, 16 says, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. This is why we're doing this series. And I found that whenever you bring sin into the light, do you know that it loses its power? Sin in darkness or sin in hiding, that's where the power from sin comes. So when you start talking about it in the light, it loses its power.

And it was really scary, really scary to tell someone else. But there's something really powerful and freeing about that stuff that you've been living in your brain that you don't even know some of it's in there anymore. And it's just been living rent free in there for you to kind of just let it go. And for you to admit to someone else, like, I am not perfect. I'm far from it. I'm a mess. And here's what I've done. I own it. I actually repeated the same assignment two weeks later and confessed to someone else and found it to be just as meaningful.

John Ortberg in his book Steps, I interviewed him on my podcast, said that once he got to this stage, again, it's one of the most challenging and he had his list written out and he had an accountability partner and he said, I got my list and I didn't want to share it. It's a lot on there. And he said, he just kind of unloaded on this guy. And his friend was quiet for a while. And there was some awkward silence. And the part where John was like, oh, I might've ruined this. The friend said two things, John. One, Jesus forgives you. And secondly, John, I've never loved you as much as I love you now. It's scary. It's hard. But man, when you bring sin into light, there's so much freedom that comes. That is steps four and five. Look inside and tell the truth.

And that is, I'm not going to sugarcoat this. That's my challenge for you this week. I mean, you don't need to go buy a two-hour cigar if some of you are a little too excited about that part of it. I mean, you can if you want, if you're of age, of course. Find some time, get alone. Put your phone away. Take a pen and some paper and in some form of this question, answer, where have I not been the person God has called me to be? Where have I not been the person God has called me to be? And just start writing. Don't excuse yourself. Don't look to blame anyone else. Just look at you.

I didn't tell my counselor, but it was a two-hour beat down. And so the last few minutes of it, I actually just started writing some positive things about me. What God, how God sees me. And it was really restorative. And the point isn't that you would hate yourself or that you'd experience more shame, but rather to see that your story isn't over and that you have greater chapters ahead. And why we can do a fearless moral inventory is not just because we're going to need to have courage, but it's far more because of who you are confessing to originally, and that is God.

And you do not need to fear God. There is nothing you can say. There's nothing you can write on this list that like is going to freak God out, or it's not like God's going to be like, oh man, you invented that sin. I didn't ever see that one until you came into the world. God knew everything that you've written, everything you will write, and he already went to the cross for you. And let me tell you, God didn't half measure your salvation. He paid the full price. He gave everything, everything in order for you to experience all of the freedom you want. And there's far too many people that believe in Jesus and have your eternity secured. And yet you're wondering why you're kind of struggling to experience the freedom that you have in this world. And it's because you're still caught up in sin. And God made a way for you to get through it, but sometimes it's hard work.

Now the consequence between you and God is taken care of, but to have peace and freedom with others and those around me, that's hard. And so you're going to fight at it and you're going to bristle against this. But he does, but you will find it worth everything you give it. Jonah could see everything wrong with the Ninevites, but what we're going to see in the next couple of chapters of Jonah, and I think actually in the whole book, is that yes, it's a book about God trying to reach people far away, but it's far more about God allowing Jonah to see how God sees Jonah. It's going to get deeper. There's still hard work to do.

So we ended with the Ninevites believing God from this terrible sermon, and we're going to pick it up there next week. But your challenge this week, I hope you do it in some way, shape, or form. I hope you don't half measure it. Where have I not been the person God has called me to be? And I'd like to practice that now corporately with you. Can you stand? Let's at least enter into it for a moment. Let's start where we started this series with hands to the side, and I'd like to re-enter what we said in the very first phrase of this sermon series. Hi, my name is, put your name in, and say, and I am a sinner. On the count of three. One, two, three.

Hi, my name is Zach, and I am a sinner. I can't. Jesus can, so I surrender. Tell me, I can't. Jesus can. I surrender. Take those two hands, put them on your heart, look inside, and close your eyes, and just for a minute, share with God. Searching in fearless moral inventory, share the ways that you've fallen short, sins that you've hidden, stuff you've kept in darkness.

I want you to open your eyes and look at me, and I want to tell you two things. First, Jesus forgives you. Second, I'm going to change it a little bit, because his friend said, I've never loved you as much as I've loved you right now, and theologically that's not quite true, because God's always loved you, and so maybe hear it this way, that I've heard and seen your worst, and I deeply love you still. Isn't that good? Yeah. You can clap. Yeah, you can clap.

I asked our church, all campuses, to sing the same song. There's a new song that we've been singing, and it's called God, I'm Just Grateful. And that describes me, with how God's been in my story. Maybe it describes you, and there's a certain line in the song, it's a sneaky, sneaky line that I like that's my

favorite, and it goes with today, where it says, and you've given me chance after chance, and then I think they call that an octave, it goes an octave higher after chance, and that's, those are my two favorite words, the octave higher after chance, because it helps me remember that God's got another chance for me, he does for you too. So, if you're grateful, let's praise God.