

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Loosen Your Grip

### Jonah 2

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Well, good to see all of you here. And those of you who are joining online, thank you for being here today on this Palm Sunday. Also, just say we are looking forward to Easter next week and hope you're all going to be here. And encourage you to invite friends, maybe people you know that don't go to church. And also, please go to the 8:00 service if you can, because we want to have space for the people who, if they're visitors, if they're new, they're going to come to the later services. So encourage you to go to the 8:00 services next week. And park at Bellevue Christian, take the shuttle down. It'll just make your lives easier. But we're looking forward to great Easter. We are coming to the end of a sermon series on how Jesus restores us through sabbath. And sabbath is a day to connect with God, people who point us to Jesus, things we delight in to be restored to mental, emotional, and spiritual strength.

Whether you're feeling depleted because of a health crisis or a relationship problem or just plain busyness, sabbath restores us. And this is about as counterculture a thing that we could possibly do because our whole culture works against sabbath. Even if you're retired, you're super busy all the time. Or we have days off, but we're not really being restored, we're not really having sabbath in them. And today's text, the text I'm going to look at today, points to one of the reasons why sabbath is so hard for us and some of the solutions. And it comes from the Book of Jonah where God says to a prophet named Jonah, "Go preach to a city called Nineveh." That was Israel's enemy. And Jonah hated Ninevites. So instead, he got on a boat to head to Spain, which was the opposite direction of Nineveh.

A big storm comes up, he goes overboard, he's swallowed by a big fish. And there's lots of debate among scholars whether or not this is a parable meant to illustrate a point or an actual miraculous historical event. But either way, it kind of has the same message. So the fish swallows Jonah and then it says, "From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord." That's a weird sentence, isn't it? From inside the... Gross, it's just gross. But what it shows is that you can pray pretty much anywhere, right? You can pray inside a fish. You can

pray each time you wish. You can pray both here and there. You can pray most anywhere. I have a future in children's literature, I think.

So then Jonah's praying and it says, "In my distress, I called to the Lord and He answered me. The engulfing waters threatened me, but you, Lord, my God, brought my life up from the pit. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will say salvation comes from the Lord. Those who cling to worthless idols miss out on the grace that could be theirs." And let me define that word idol. An idol is anything, often very good things, that become more important to us than God and that we look to for happiness and security. So success at work or school, popularity, sex, money, education, those are all good things. All of those are really good things. But if they become more important to us than God or we look to them for our security and our happiness more than we look to God, they become idols.

And if we cling to them, we're going to miss the grace, the hope, the courage, the beauty, the good things God wants to give us. And at the root of our inability to sabbath, there is always idols that we're clinging to. We can't sabbath because we've got idols. We overwork because we're fearful of losing our job or not rising up the corporate ladder because we think that's what's going to make us happy. Or we can't say no to anything because we're afraid of missing out on something or that we think might be super satisfying. Or we don't want to say no and disappoint people because we want everyone to like us because that's what we think is going to make us feel valued and loved. Or maybe we have lots of time on our hands, but we don't actually sabbath. And instead, we scroll social media, binge-watch TV because our idol is entertainment rather than connecting to God and the people we love to be restored.

At the root of our inability to sabbath, there is always an idol, something we are trusting more than God to make us happy and secure. And this is one of my favorite verses in the Bible because I just think it's so true. "Those who cling," what a great word, right? Not just hang on to, cling. It's a desperate word, like clinging to a lifeboat or something, right? "Those who cling to worthless idols." And in other translations, it'll say, "Lying or deceptive idols."

For instance, a common problem a lot of families have these days is that the number of hours kids spend in sports and other activities has skyrocketed over the last 25 years. It's practice every day, multiple games a week, often on Sunday morning for kids as young as eight and nine. Often, they're out of town, the games. And that's fueled by a couple of things, but one of them is an unexamined assumption that securing our kids' economic futures is more important than many other things. Because the way you get into a good college isn't just to have great grades, it's to have lots of activities on the resume to show that you are a, quote, "Well-rounded person."

Now, if you're a parent, you may not be motivated by that, but a lot of people are. And that's driving the rise of select teams and all the stuff that's so time-consuming. And everyone else is doing it. And we don't want our kids to miss out and our kids don't want to miss out. So families are flying apart because you got to get Johnny to baseball practice and little Timmy has his Sanskrit lessons, and we wouldn't want him to get behind in Sanskrit lessons, right? Nobody has time to connect with anybody. Kids, parents massively stressed out. Let me tell you where that ends. I taught at one of the most

elite universities in the world, Stanford. And what I saw there were 20-year-olds who were emotional train wrecks, massively stressed out because they're saying yes to every opportunity.

They don't know how to say no because that's how they got into Stanford was having all those activities, so they're afraid to stop. Nobody ever taught them how to choose between multiple good things. They're having midlife crises in their twenties. Now, not all Stanford students were that way, but a lot were. All their frantic efforts were making them miserable. But everyone was saying, "You're living the dream. You've made it to the top. You should be thrilled." The idols lied to them, promised so much, delivered so little. And what's true for families with kids is true for the rest of us in one way or another. I know a lot of adults who have achieved everything they ever hope to achieve, but they're still not satisfied, still haven't found what they're looking for because their idols lied to them. They were nightmares dressed as daydreams. And right there, I just made several musical allusions spanning a 40-year timeframe in just two sentences. Observe the mastery of my craft.

Go Bono.

Yeah, Bono and Taylor Swift in one sentence, yeah. "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit," that means miss out on, "the grace that could be theirs." And grace means lots of things. It can mean a lot of things that we miss out on. But one of the things, one of the graces we miss out on is sabbath and everything that comes from sabbath, like peace of mind and meaningful relationships because we have time for them, deeper connection to Jesus. Joy and delight and restoration is the grace we miss out on.

What are you forfeiting because you're clinging to some deceptive idols, which are just making us busier and more stressed out and demand more and more of us? See, God dreams bigger dreams for us than we dream for ourselves. Today is Palm Sunday, where we remember when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and the crowds were shouting, "Hosanna," which means please save us. But then, just five days later, they were some crowd shouting, "Crucify him." And the twin idols of nationalism and politics were on full display that day, right? Because they were shouting not because he was God, but because they thought he was the political leader that was going to lead them to military victory and kick out the occupying Roman Empire. That's why they were shouting.

And when he didn't do that, they turned on him and wanted him crucified. They dreamed a political dream. They dreamed a nationalist dream. But what Jesus dreamed for them was so much bigger. Not a political victory, an eternal victory where, because Jesus dies on the cross to pay the price for our sins to solve our estrangement problem from God, and then was rose from the dead. And if we follow him, if we believe in him, we'll rise from the dead as well, right? He didn't just beat Rome, he beat death. So much bigger than a political or a nationalist victory. God dreams bigger dreams for us than we dream for ourselves. And one of those dreams is restoration, sabbath, time for connection to Jesus, meaningful relationships, things that we delight in so that we can be restored.

So then what's our role in that? How do we do that? What do we do? Well, there's one thing that we can do, and that is loosen your grip. We've got to loosen our grip on all of our idols that are keeping us from being restored. And we can loosen our grip in a

couple of ways. And the first is the one we've said throughout this sermon series because it's the key to sabbath, and that is to trust in the all sufficiency of Jesus. The last line of Jonah's prayer is, "Salvation comes from the Lord." Not from our jobs, not from how many followers we have, not from how popular we are, not from how much money we have. Salvation comes from the Lord.

And as long as we think all of those other things are going to secure our happiness and our future, we'll never be able to be restored. We will be slaves to them working harder and harder to get ahead in some way that we think we need to get ahead because we don't trust Jesus for our ultimate security and future. Number of years ago, and some of you probably remember this, the Mariners played an epic game where the starting pitcher, Wade Miley, gave up 12 runs in just a few innings.

Okay, so if you don't follow baseball, just so you know, a typical score is something like six to four. So if a pitcher gives up more than that, it's a really bad day. Giving up 12 runs in just a few innings, that is a catastrophe, right? So the Mariners were losing very badly. The manager took Miley out of the game, put in a new pitcher, the Mariners rallied, scored 14 runs, and won the game. And afterwards, Miley, the starting pitcher, said with a perfectly straight face, "Yeah, I knew if I could just hold them to 12 runs, we had a chance."

Okay, it's a little bit like that when we follow Jesus. When we screw up, when we don't get something done perfectly, when we miss something like Miley's teammates, Jesus is there and he helps us rally and get to where he wants us to be. Maybe not where we want to be, but where he wants us to be. You can take a day off. You don't have to do everything perfectly. And if that means you don't perform as well at work or school or disappoint people by saying no, or not everything gets checked off that wonderful to-do list you have, it will be okay. It will not ultimately interfere with God's plans for your life as long as you continue to follow Jesus. Second way to loosen our grip on our idols that keep us from restoration is to count the cost.

Now, if you're like me, when you hear preachers say things like, "Do what Jesus says to do, give generously, forgive your enemies, take a sabbath day every week," you might sometimes think, "Ah, that's so hard. That's so hard." Now, if you think that, I just want you to know, I think that too about my own sermons, even as I'm writing them. We are so good at counting the cost of following Jesus, and we so rarely count the cost of not following Jesus. What's the grace, the beautiful things you're missing out on because you're clinging to some deceptive idol? And I got lots of idols. I'm preaching to myself in this one. You're just overhearing me talk to myself. Maybe we're missing family memories because we're all so busy going this way and that way we can't make them. Maybe we're missing out on meaningful relationships because we're too busy to have them or we're damaging the ones we do have because we're in get it done mode.

Maybe because our version of sabbath is binge-watching something, which ultimately doesn't restore us as much as being with God and with other people, we're not being restored. If you've gone through this sermon series on sabbath thinking, "I've got too much to do. I can't possibly afford to practice sabbath," I would respectfully suggest you can't afford not to, because this pace is killing us. It's pulling families apart. It's part of the rise of anxiety and depression. It keeps us from God, robbing us of restoration and

wholeness. And then the third way to loosen our grip on the idols that keep us from sabbath, we have to ask the question always, what's most important? Because our schedule is just a synonym for our priorities. To say, "I'm too busy to sabbath," is the same thing as saying, "Yeah, all these other things are more important to me than sabbathing and being with God and the people I love. These other things are more important."

We prioritize our kids' economic futures over their mental health, prioritize getting ahead over good relationships, prioritize getting things done over community. When our daughter was in middle school, she had a lot of school stress. She wanted an A. She would always say, "I want an A+ in everything." But it was killing her. And especially with math, she used to sob every day, every night when she had to do math homework. Instead of doing the homework, she would just sit at the table and cry. And we'd help her, but she'd still cry and we'd be like, "Okay, you can cry and do math at the same time, and then the math will be done." We thought that was good logic. It didn't work.

She felt so much stress trying to get an A in everything, it was killing her. She was clinging to the lying idol of academic perfection that is so prevalent here on the east side. So finally, one day I looked at her and I said, "This is how it's going to be, okay? I want to see you get some Bs sometimes. As your father, I am commanding, I am demanding as your father to get a B on some things sometimes. I don't want to see all As. If you come home with As all the time, I'm going to be upset. I want you to get a B on something." I committed Bellevue blasphemy.

Now, we wanted our kids to do their best in school. We didn't want academic slackers. I said, "Get a B on some things, not get a B on everything." But it was killing her. And she did wind up getting a couple of Bs on things here and there, and it ruined her life. And now she lives in our basement eating soda crackers watching reruns of *The Bachelor*. I'm kidding. We don't have a basement. She's fine. She didn't get into Stanford. Oh, who cares, right? She went to college. She's got a job she loves. What was more important, her perfect academic record or her wholeness, her connection to Jesus, her peace of mind? That's why my wife and I limited our kids to one activity at a time to teach them the skill of choosing between multiple good options.

We deliberately chose less competitive teams so they wouldn't have all that stress until later on when my son, he was in high school, joined a more competitive team, but not until he was in high school. We sometimes missed a game or a swim meet if it was on Sunday morning because church matters. And my kids turned out just fine, okay? We scarred them in lots of other ways, but not this way. It helps to do this in community, right? If there are other Christian families on the team, work with them so your kids aren't the only ones missing a game here or there. And for all of us, whether we have kids at home or not, limit your work hours, limit social media. All the data shows it's making us anxious and afraid. It doesn't restore us. You don't have to do everything perfectly. Let the house be messy. It's no big deal. Don't get a grip, loosen your grip.

And throughout this series, we've been building into sabbath one brick at a time, one block at a time. So first week we said, "Prepare." Second week, we said, "No, seriously, we're doing this. Prepare." Week three, stop doing something for a whole day. Week four, rest. Week five, do things that give you delight. Week six, worship. And this week,

holy week, the week before Easter, we're going to practice it. Put it all together. Find a whole day to sabbath. And on that day, do things like read scripture and pray and listen to worship music because sabbath always should include connection to Jesus. Also, maybe take a walk, be with friends you love, be with family, eat a good meal, play music or games. Do things that bring you life and joy so that you can be restored.

There's a man I know whose life was his job. He worked all the time. And it was straining his marriage and his relationship with his kids. And then his company announced that they were going to have to do layoffs. So he doubled down and started working even more, trying to make every project perfect to prove that he was way too valuable to lay off. He was clinging. In the meantime, forfeiting relationship with his wife, his kids, his friends, his own mental health, his connection to Jesus. He was irritable at work and at home, always snapping at people because he was just in get it done mode all the time. And guess what? After all of that, he still got laid off. And he was devastated. And he couldn't find another job for a really long time, which was scary because money was getting kind of scarce.

But at the same time, all of that drove him to pray a lot more. And gradually, along with his prayers, Jesus helped me find a job. He started noticing some things in his life that were really good, like his wife and his kids that he'd been too busy to really enjoy. And so he started spending more time with them, which improved all of those relationships. He began to thank God for the good things in his life. And he began to feel more connected to Jesus as his brain detoxed from all of that frantic activity. And he couldn't look for a job all day, every day, so he started doing things that brought him to light. Along with connecting with Jesus, he'd do things like hikes, bike riding, cooking, music. He began volunteering with his church to mentor kids from under-resourced communities to help them do well in school so they can get out of poverty, but also help them have better relationships, someone to talk to about their problems, and he loves it.

And he's seen miracles. Kids getting out of gangs, lonely kids finding friends. He says he feels the power of Jesus now almost every day. "Some days," he said, "it's like electricity in my body." And it gives him so much joy to see all these lives transformed and to be making meaningful relationships with not just these kids, but their families. It was a forced, extended sabbath that restored him and helped him experience Jesus, community, relationships, and the joy of doing things he delighted in. And eventually, he got another job, but this time with boundaries, this time with sabbath, prioritizing what matters most. And he's way less stressed out. He's being restored not just to who he was, restored to better than new. And that can be you and that can be me when we practice sabbath.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, a singer named Billy Joel recorded a song called Vienna. And in the song, Vienna is not just a city in Europe, it's a metaphor for more relaxed life where there's rest and restoration. Time for people, time for joy, an unhurried life living the unforced rhythms of grace. That's what Vienna represents in the song. And the lyrics say, "Slow down, crazy child. You're so ambitious for a juvenile. But if you're so smart, tell me, why are you still so afraid?" That's a good question. "Where's the fire? What's the hurry about? You better cool it off before you burn it out. You've got so much to do and only so many hours in a day. Slow down, crazy child. Take the phone



off the hook and disappear for a while. It's all right. You can afford to lose a day or two. When will you realize Vienna waits for you?"

So, Jesus, help us to trust you. Help us to trust your all sufficiency so that we can rest. God, you made the world in six days and rested on the seventh. You don't even show up to the office every day, so teach us we don't need to either. And follow you because we know that our future is secure, not by our frantic efforts, but by you. And Jesus, you are the Lord of rest. You give real rest. So Lord, this week when we Sabbath, meet us there, help us experience you, help us be restored to who you created us to be, and we will be grateful people and give you our thanks and our praise. In your name, Jesus, amen.

### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do you see in this prayer: Thanksgiving? A call for help? Recommitment? Other?
- What do you make of the fact that Jonah prays "inside the fish" (v.1)?
- How does Jonah view circumstances in this prayer?

Optional Question: Verse 8 is translated differently in different versions of the Bible. What do your versions say and how does each different translation shed light on the meaning of the verse?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.

**This week's Sabbath practice: PRACTICE  
All Together Now!**

- Prepare
- Stop
- Rest
- Delight
- Worship