

Minor Prophets' Major Gripes, V

Jonah on Second Chances

July 6, 2003

JONAH'S "SPECIAL" ASSIGNMENT

We've covered four obscure prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah. Today we get the only celebrity Minor Prophet: Jonah. Every Minor Prophet who spoke against a hostile, foreign nation (like Obadiah with Edom) got to do so from his homeland; except for Jonah ... he was told to preach on the enemy's turf.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai [uh-MIT-eye]: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. - Jonah 1:1-3 NIV

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's most feared and hated enemy. The Assyrians were infamous for their brutality. Maybe the assignment scared the prophecy out of him!

Jonah didn't argue with God ... he just ran. But it's not fear that stopped Jonah; it was hatred (Ninevites were like Nazis). These were Israel's worst oppressors. If Jonah did his job, they might repent and God would forgive them.

- Jonah desired their destruction over their deliverance

Q: Are there people in your life like that? Someone who's harmed, hurt, or injured you? Someone you'd rather see "burn than turn"?

JUMP, JIVE, AND WHALE

So, Jonah boards a big cargo ship and sets sail - and God sends this horrendous storm - and the ship starts to break apart.

All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god [Remember that; it's important] - Jonah 1:5 NIV

They throw the cargo overboard - doesn't help - they cast lots to find out who's responsible - and the lots indicate Jonah.

... [the sailors] asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." [CONTINUED]

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) – Jonah 1:8-10 NIV

The ship is breaking up in this unmerciful savage storm, and the panicked, superstitious sailors ask Jonah who he is and what he's doing. I picture it like this: [Storm effects]

Jonah: Running from God.
Sailors: Which god?
Jonah: The God who made the sea.
Sailors: The GOD OF THE SEA! Toss him!

Actually, they didn't toss him right away.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. – Jonah 1:11-12 NIV

Q: Ever feel convicted when a non-Christian co-worker or friend exhibits more Christ-like behavior than you? God uses that.

These heathen sailors have more compassion for the life of one stranger than Jonah (the prophet of the one true God) has for the souls of an entire nation. Even the captain rebukes Jonah for sleeping instead of praying:

The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! – Jonah 1:6 NIV

But the sea grows even wilder – so finally they take Jonah and throw him overboard – and the sea grows calm.

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. – Jonah 1:17 NIV

This part really bothers some people. That couldn't happen; you couldn't stay alive; come on! They get so hung up on the story of a big fish that they miss the whole point - about a big God.

A WHALE OF A TALE

Q: Can I have permission to do a little wild speculating here?

It is possible that Jonah didn't live in that fish for three days. He could've drowned before it swallowed him.

Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, but You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. – Jonah 2:5-6 NAS

If he had, he would've descended to Sheol (where souls were waiting for the resurrection and judgment). He did say that:

I cried for help from the depth of Sheol ... - Jonah 2:2 NAS

After three days he could've been resurrected. The fish would've preserved the body. Remember when Jesus told the Pharisees:

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 12:39-40 NIV

Jonah would've gained an unparalleled perspective on the vital importance of God's grace being extended to all of mankind. But that's wild speculation.

NO MORE BELLY-ACHING

What we do know is that Jonah finally got God's point.

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. 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 the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. – Jonah 2:8-10 NIV

Then Jonah thought: Why didn't I think of THAT two days ago?! **What I have vowed I will make good** probably refers to Jonah's prophetic commitment, reflecting repentance for his rebellion.

And Jonah walked through the center of the city with God's word.

He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." – Jonah 3:4 NIV

A small (five words in Hebrew) message with huge results:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. - Jonah 3:5 NIV

And God had compassion on the Ninevites. And Jonah threw a fit.

... is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." – Jonah 3:10-4:3 NIV

Jonah couldn't imagine returning home, facing his family and friends, knowing that he was solely responsible for God's mercy and compassion being extended to their worst enemy. You see, although he had repented of his actions, he hadn't repented of his attitude toward the Assyrians. He still preferred destruction to conversion!

THE WORM TURNS

So, he sat outside the city for forty days hoping God would still destroy it. It was hot, but he had a nice shade plant.

But ... God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head ... -
Jonah 4:7-8 NIV

And Jonah cared more about that plant than people. So, God said.

"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" - Jonah 4:10-11 NIV

And this is where the story ends. We don't get to know Jonah's answer. That's because the question is really intended for us.

Q: Do you share the sentiments of God's heart?

He is deeply grieved over the pain and hurt caused by man's evil actions; but He's equally grieved by their lost condition.

Q: Is there anyone in your life you'd have a hard time asking God to bless, in spite of how they've treated you?

If we try to avoid God's assignments with those people (i.e. forgiving, praying for, reconciling with) sooner or later God will bring the storms into our lives because of it.

- And He may keep us under until we get the point.

It takes divine grace to release the kind of bitterness, anger, and hurt that Jonah held toward the Ninevites.

We must be willing to step outside of our own pain in order to appreciate God's grace and compassion to those people. If you try to run, He'll disrupt your plans!

And He'll use anything, from a whale to a worm to get our attention and get us back on track.