

Jonah Inside the Great Fish • Jonah 1-4

Should we love our enemies? When our nation is under attack, when those who attack us are vicious and murderous, when we are victimized and vulnerable should we not seek revenge? Since the terrorist attacks on the United States there has been a flood of answers to these questions. Some say “forgive” and some say “revenge”. The issues are not new.

These were very real questions for the prophet from Galilee. He was patriotic and loved his country. He hated the nation of Assyria that repeatedly brutalized his people. He was against foreigners and willing to pay any price to hold on to his patriotic principles.

It was the eighth century BC and that prophet from Galilee was Jonah. One of the worst days of Jonah’s life was the day God came and spoke directly to him: *“The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”*

Because Jonah hated the Assyrians the last thing in the world he wanted to do was go to their great city of Nineveh and preach repentance. What if they listened? What if they repented? What if God spared them instead of destroying them? Jonah could not think of anything worse. So we read in Jonah 1:3, *“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.*

Nineveh was east; Jonah went west. Nineveh was across land; Jonah boarded a ship. Apparently Jonah thought that God was a district manager with no authority outside of Israel. If he could get out of God’s territory then he could escape God’s will.

Jonah is not alone in his efforts to escape God. Men and women have been doing it ever since. We somehow think if we move across country, change churches, walk out of a marriage, switch schools or

get a different job that we can escape the will of God. How indescribably foolish! God will follow us wherever we go. He will hound us and pursue us and even make our lives miserable in order to get us where he wants us to go.

Once on board ship, Jonah went below deck and fell asleep. He thought he had successfully run away from God. But God would not let him off so easily. The Lord stirred up a raging eastern Mediterranean storm. The pagan sailors knew this storm was supernatural. They tried to row to shore but couldn’t make it. Thinking they were going to die, they rolled the dice to determine whose behavior had so angered the gods and the dice pointed to Jonah. He admitted that he was running from God and suggested they throw him overboard to drown in order to save their own lives. Jonah would rather have died than go where God wanted him to go and do what God wanted him to do.

They feared the consequences if they murdered this man whom God was interested in. Maybe then God would make the storm even worse. But it seemed there was nothing else they could do, so they grabbed him and heaved him into the sea. Quickly the waters calmed. The ship and sailors were saved. It was time for Jonah to drown.

I flew over the ocean as I was reading the story of Jonah. I looked out the plane window and wondered

what it would be like to be alone at sea without a flotation device, no ship, far from land and without any hope of survival. Is it possible to just give up and let yourself drown? Or does the instinct for survival force you to swim and splash

even though you know it will make no difference?

Convinced that he was going to drown, Jonah got the surprise of a lifetime. *“The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”*

Is this good news? Eating fish is one thing, but being eaten by a fish is not a happy dining experience. That gives a whole different meaning to “sea-

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food”.

Actually, it has happened to others. There are stories of people who have experienced exactly this and have survived. Usually the swallowed person becomes unconscious. Cold water reduces the need for oxygen. If the fish surfaces often enough it is possible to get enough oxygen to survive. But who would want to? If you don’t die of asphyxiation, the stomach juices will get you. If you are fortunate enough to somehow get out of the fish, all you do is drown. No matter how you look at it this it is not a good situation.

There is a Jewish expression that means “long enough to be dead for sure.” It is the expression “three days and three nights.” It doesn’t mean 72 literal hours, just long enough to be totally dead.

Inside the fish Jonah was conscious long enough to do what I would have done. He prayed. He prayed like he had never prayed before. There is something about an extreme crisis that makes all of us especially eloquent in our prayers to God. Actually, he sang. He wasn’t in good enough shape to write a good tune. It was probably a song he knew before the fish came along. It is a song for times of trouble. The words are expressions of faith and hope, believing the impossible—that God will rescue him from the inside of the fish. He says in Jonah 2:1-2, “*In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.*”

Indeed he did. God heard Jonah’s prayer. “*And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*”

Do you believe that really happened? Do you believe that God ordered a fish and it vomited on command at just the right place? I believe that. I believe this really happened. Let me explain why. I believe in the supernatural. I believe that God is ultimately in control of our world and that he can do anything he chooses to do. If you don’t believe in the supernatural there is no way you can believe in miracles. If you do believe in the supernatural then you can believe in miracles.

Those who believe in the supernatural have a reason to pray. We are convinced that God hears and acts and that God makes a difference. Whether praying about everyday routine events in our lives or praying about the clash of nations, Christians

believe in a supernatural God. We believe it is true that “*the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*”

Jonah got a second chance. That doesn’t happen to everyone. Some people cause such disaster in their lives the first time around that their best hope is to move on to Plan B. But God gave Jonah a second shot at Plan A. God re-commissioned him to go to Nineveh in Jonah 3:1-4:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

Don’t think that Jonah changed his attitude—because he didn’t. He only changed his behavior. Jonah still hated the Assyrians. He still did not want the people of Nineveh to repent of their sin. He wanted God to judge them and destroy them. He was a man of revenge, not forgiveness or love. He did the right thing with the wrong attitude. His fish ride had taught him to reluctantly obey, but it had not changed his heart. And Jonah’s worst fears came true:

the Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how

they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

To Jonah's total dismay his enemies listened to God's warning and repented of their sins. The king issued an official decree. Jonah's loving God was delighted to spare the lives of 120,000 people. God had compassion and called off the judgment he had threatened.

Why would the population of a whole city suddenly repent of sin and turn to God? Was it because Jonah was such a persuasive preacher? Probably not! Jonah was half-hearted at best. He didn't want them to listen or repent.

There were probably multiple reasons. We know from ancient records that around the time of Jonah there were several calamities that hit the nation of Assyria including military defeats, famine, a major earthquake and a solar eclipse on June 15, 763 C (during the 10th year of the reign of King Ashurbanipal). We also know that large groups of people, just like individuals, are most prone to turn to God in the midst of calamity.

It was enough to make Jonah want to vomit. Even though he had prayed to God in his own distress, even though God had heard his desperate prayer, even though God had given him a second chance—he didn't want his enemies to pray, repent or get a second chance. Jonah wanted good things to happen to him and bad things to happen to his enemies.

So Jonah was mad at God. God had deeply disappointed him. Jonah was very unhappy.

... Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, 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 wanted good things to happen to him and bad things to happen to his enemies.

If he were younger we would say he was an arrogant brat. Jonah wanted everything his way or he wanted to die. He was disgusted with God for being God and doing right.

There are a lot of people who have been angry with God in every generation. We pray and tell God that we don't like who he is or what he does. We have life all figured out and we expect God to comply with our preferences. We want to call the shots, write the plans and have everyone else fit our dreams. When God does not meet our expectations we respond with anger and punishment. Jonah thought he could punish or manipulate God with threats of suicide.

I wish I could tell you that by the end of the story Jonah grew up and started behaving with greater faith and maturity, but he never did. Still holding out hope

that the people of Nineveh would not repent and God would destroy the city, he went out of town and camped out to get a CNN view of the action. As he sat watching, a plant like Jack's beanstalk grew up next to him providing him with a few hours of shade and happiness. Then, as if his life didn't have enough problems, God sent a worm to kill his plant. If he wasn't upset with God before he was really outraged with God now because his shade had wilted. He was so angry he was suicidal.

Jonah's story is really sad. He wanted to be saved from death but he did not want others saved from death. He wanted to be loved by God but he didn't want God to love others. He was totally upset when his plant died but he didn't care if 120,000 people died. He was a selfish, self-centered rebel against God whose only concern was what he wanted.

That is the end of Jonah's biography in the Bible. His story ends in disgust and defiance against God. But there are multiple lessons for us to learn and live: (1) God is loving no matter what we feel; (2) God is right even if we don't agree with him; (3) God pursues us no matter where we go; and (4) God gives second chances even when we rebel.

Let's take God's principles out of Jonah's biography and weave them into our stories. What does

God want you to do? Where does God want you to go? Have you been running away from God? If so, are you ready to come back? Have you disobeyed? Do you have a bad attitude? Do you want another chance?

Jonah got on thing very right. He understood the goodness of God to those who sin against God. In Jonah 4:2 Jonah said, *“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”*

Don’t wait until you are thrown overboard. Don’t rebel until some whale of a fish swallows you. Decide right here and right now to go where God wants you to go (whether you feel like it or not). And, if God offers to you a second chance, grab it. Say “yes” to God.

God of second chances, thank you for not giving up on us. Thank you for pursuing us into distant and stormy seas. Thank you for the fish you send to swallow us up and get us to where you want us to be.

Now, Lord, listen to each of our prayers as we tell you that we are sorry for running away. We will go wherever you want us to go. We will do whatever you want us to do. We will submit our wills to your will. We will sacrifice our bad attitudes and be controlled by your love. We promise—in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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