

# A Whale of a Fish Story

## Jonah

One day, two buddies rented a boat and fished a lake. After hauling in 30 fish, one said to his friend, "Mark this spot so that we can come here tomorrow." The next day when they were going back to rent the boat, he asked, "Did you mark that spot like I said?"

His friend replied, "Yeah, I put a big 'X' on the bottom of the boat."

The first one said, "What good did that do? What if we don't get that same boat today?"

I may have seen this on a plaque somewhere: "Fishing will do a lot for a man but it won't make him truthful." The world may call the story of Jonah and the fish a "wild fish story." But, we who worship the Creator have no trouble believing that God could keep a rebellious prophet alive for three days in the belly of a fish. Of course, that fish was just God's prop. The more amazing story in this brief book of *Jonah* is the story of God's relentless love for mankind.

*Jonah* is unique among those Old Testament books designated the Minor Prophets in that it is not a collection of a prophet's oracles, but rather, a narrative about his experiences. After, the kingdom of Solomon divided, Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel.

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup>"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." - *Jonah* 1:1, 2

Ninevah was the huge capital city of Assyria, the empire that would eventually destroy Israel. Ninevah would repent in response to Jonah's message, and revival would be born. This change of heart would be short-lived. A century and a half later, Ninevah would fall to the Babylonians. God would eventually carry out this judgment. But for now, let us direct our attention to the book's more enduring theme, God's relentless love.

## I. Jonah Perishing Chapter 1

### A. A Rebellious Prophet Flees the Will of God

<sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup>"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

<sup>3</sup>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.

Jonah did not wish to go. It appears that he was either being a bit bigoted or a bit self-righteous, for later in the book, Jonah will insist that the reason he ran was that he suspected God might show Himself to be a "softy". Jonah clearly seemed to prefer that Ninevah be destroyed.

Jonah jumped a ship to Tarshish which means "to smelt." There were several cities by this name around the Mediterranean Sea that were involved in mineral trade. Wherever this Tarshish was, Jonah thought he could put distance between himself and God. He was wrong. A storm arose. To these ancient pagan sailors, a storm suggested that some god was angry, so each sailor started praying to his own god, but no one knew whose god was angry. Perhaps, it was the god of that Israelite sleeping in the hold of the ship. Jonah had told them that he was running from his god.

Jonah is an easy man for us to criticize, but when the sailors summoned him, he calmly confessed to them that his own disobedience to his own God was the cause behind the storm. Jonah introduced them to *YAHWEH*, the God of Israel, the one God of heaven Who created all things.

Once Jonah realized that the gig was up, he did a noble thing. Not knowing whether or not *YAHWEH* would kill him, he sought to spare these sailors caught in the crossfire. He told them to throw him overboard. Reluctantly, and in great fear of Jonah's god, they did as they were instructed. The sea grew calm, and these pagan sailors vowed to sacrifice to this mighty God of the Hebrews. Jonah was quite gifted at speaking for God whenever he finally got around to it. It seemed like such a waste now that Jonah seemed to be little more than shark bait, until ...

## **B. A Loving, but Disciplinary Father Tracks Down a Wayward Son**

With all the new technology surrounding fertility, it is becoming more commonplace for couples in their forties, fifties and even sixties to become proud new parents. Social commentators are delighted. They note that some of these older fathers, having been mellowed by the years, are more patient and doting with young infants. However, this positive observation about older fathers is offset somewhat by their increased tendency to forget where they put them.

No description of God touches us more deeply than that of a Father, Who will never lose track of His own. Perhaps, we would see this whole parent/child thing better if we saw the relationship through God's eyes. You can be quite the handful. Jonah was on the run, and God had to chase him down. The sailors tried to row back to the shore before they consented to toss Jonah into the sea. Now, if God didn't intend to kill Jonah, why He didn't just send him a piece of driftwood or simply wash him up on a beach somewhere. Perhaps, a perfect Father decided this particular child needed a "time-out."

"<sup>17</sup>But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights." - Jonah 1:17

Did God create this fish for the occasion, or, in foreknowledge did He raise this fish from an egg? Which would be a bigger miracle? It doesn't matter. What is awesome to us is just a token of the Creator's might. The fact that He would do all of this just to salvage one wayward prophet is the part of the story that should intrigue us the most. Disobedience to God brings distress, but God loves His own even when they are disobedient. But, He is also a parent that insists that we be useful to the family business. Because He loves, He disciplines us to salvage us:

"... <sup>10</sup>Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness." - Hebrews 12:10

## **II. Jonah Praying Chapter 2**

### **A. A Broken Man Finds God's Forgiveness**

I grew up with this story, but I also grew up with Walt Disney. When *Pinocchio* was swallowed by a whale, he had a little table and chair, a candelabrum to see by and lot's of elbow room. I suspect that the real inside of a fish is more like a cramped, dark and very smelly coffin. Jonah was at death's door before this fish swallowed him. It is possible that he didn't even know that he was in a fish until after he was freed. What is clear is that Jonah praised God for His mercy:

... "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.

<sup>3</sup>You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas,

and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

<sup>4</sup>I said, "I have been banished from your sight;

yet I will look again toward your holy temple." - Jonah 2:2-4

The first time I preached on *Jonah* was in the Westview Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in Northwest Indiana. I said to the men gathered there (by the way, I was just visiting): “There’s a lot of religion inside prison walls and a lot of people on the outside who are skeptical about jailhouse conversions. They know that some of you will no sooner be out of jail than you will be back in. Know that you might be in the belly of a fish right now by the grace of God. God may be disciplining you, but He may also be sheltering you from something far worse. The question is, ‘How important will obedience to God be to you from this moment forward?’”

Today, you may find yourself imprisoned in a different kind of fish, shackled with chains you have forged through your own rebellion against God. Trace the path of your disobedience and come clean as to why you are where you are. You need to recognize the kindness of God that has sheltered you from being any worse off than you are. And especially, you need to obey God from this moment on. Authentic repentance must express itself in a renewed passion for obedience.

### **B. A Pardoned Sinner Receives a New Start**

<sup>10</sup>And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

God knows our weaknesses, but He uses us nevertheless. When God restores a man, He restores him completely. After Jonah’s rebellion and repentance, God did not turn to another prophet. He did not require Jonah to work his way back up through the ranks of the prophets. He didn’t put Jonah on probation. The LORD simply reminded Jonah, “I gave you a task to do, and you have not yet done it.” When a man falls, people are slow to trust him. A process of restoration, healing and discernment seems necessary because we cannot see into another’s heart. Some distrust is just due to our sinful cynicism and unforgiving natures. But, God does see into the human heart, and when He judges that repentance is authentic, He forgives us and He restores us completely.

Out of the blue, a little boy told his babysitter, "You know, one time I broke my mom's lamp." The sitter asked if his mother was angry when it happened. "She was disappointed," the little guy replied. The sitter assured him that her reaction was understandable.

After a few moments of silence, the little boy added, "But I don't understand ... Mom says it's all forgotten ... but I still remember it. Why can't she?"

Said the sitter, “It’s because you have a nice mom.”

The Bible tells us that God removes our sins “as far as the east is from the west.” He says, “I will remember their sins no more.” That’s a little hard to take in. But, “God is love.” “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” And, perfect love is embodied in Jesus, Who bears our sins away.

## **III. Jonah Preaching Chapter 3**

### **A. A Restored Man Obeys God**

<sup>1</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: <sup>2</sup>“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

<sup>3</sup>Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.

Go figure. After three days in the belly of a fish, Jonah sees the prudence of obeying the LORD. Jonah was given a specific oracle: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (verse 4). There is no evidence that he preached of any hope. Things were looking up for Jonah. He was obeying God, and God was using him to announce the destruction of a wicked city. But just to obey God because we are driven to do so is not quite the same as joyfully being a part of the things God wants to accomplish. Cold obedience can be blind to God's real purposes.

Now, that he was finally on board with God, Jonah was perfectly happy to preach hellfire and damnation to the people of Nineveh. Frankly, they deserved it. As long as God pushed the delete key in the end and justly obliterated those miserable Assyrians, all would be well. But God had something else in mind, something Jonah was not geared up to accept.

## **B. God Extends Grace Once Again**

The people of Nineveh believed Jonah. They covered themselves in sack-cloth, a coarse fabric worn during times of mourning. They even covered their livestock in sack-cloth. For a city renowned for its arrogant pride, this was a humiliating expression of lowliness. Their repentance moved the great heart of God. He had compassion and did not destroy them as He had said.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Jonah was counting on God behaving in a certain way. If God wiped Nineveh off the map, everyone would regard Jonah as a credible prophet. But, the power of God's Word in Jonah's preaching produced a change of heart in those who heard it. Jonah was angry. He understood God's command to preach judgment, but he could not fathom God's grace. He thought Nineveh ought to perish. But, there is a power to the Word of God that can overrule the half-hearted motives, hidden agendas and judgmental desires of those who proclaim it.

Paul knew this. From jail, he wrote to the Philippian church about opportunistic men who were using his imprisonment as an opportunity to advance their own status in the eyes of the believers. Still, even though the motives of these men were horrible, Paul found an unusual basis for joy:

... "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice ..." - Philippians 1:18

## **IV. Jonah Pouting Chapter 4**

### **A. An Intolerant Man Resents the Mercy of God**

<sup>1</sup>But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

<sup>4</sup>But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Jonah needed someone else to suffer for him to feel good about himself as a prophet. One writer called Jonah "the patron saint of anyone who secretly smiles when the high school prom queen shows up at the 25<sup>th</sup> reunion with 60 extra pounds." Jonah was displeased with God's mercy to others, which proved his own deficient understanding of the grace that God had extended to him. He had forgotten the lesson of the fish. Perhaps, Jonah was embarrassed. He had announced destruction, and God had pulled the rug out from under him. After all, a prophet's worth was measured by his accuracy. Jonah's desire to die seems over the edge, but as a prophet, he was accustomed to getting things right. Now, his calling made little sense.

We have yet another opportunity to judge Jonah harshly, but again, tread carefully. Do you always look on others with the same eyes of mercy through which God looked at you?

## **B. A Patient God Teaches His Prophet a Lesson**

Jonah sits down to the east of Ninevah to see what God would decide to do. He expects God to zap either him or the city. At this point, he doesn't care. Instead, God provides a vine that rapidly grows and provides shade for the prophet, easing him in his discomfort. The next morning, God provides a worm that just as rapidly destroys the vine. In the scorching sun, God asks Jonah, "Do you have a right to be mad about that vine?" Jonah insists that he does. God's lesson is simple:

<sup>10</sup>But the LORD 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. <sup>11</sup>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?"

"How about a little perspective, Jonah? You're all worked up over a vine, but you cannot appreciate My desire to save a city of 120,000 people who walk in darkness?" Here's one more chance for us to wag our heads at this bizarre prophet, but again, do so at your own risk. What's the burning passion of your heart? Is it a dying world? Or is it something a bit more trivial?

Isn't it interesting what can bring tears to our eyes and what cannot? Sometimes, we find ourselves getting choked up over the storyline of some television show or a movie that was written specifically to manipulate our emotions and choke us up. Doesn't that really mean that Hollywood just played us? In the meantime, we have become too familiar, too accustomed and consequently, too indifferent to the pathos of real life – a world where right is wrong and wrong is right - a world of physical suffering and spiritual blindness - a world without Jesus.

Abruptly, Jonah's story ends. We can only speculate as to what happened next. Did Jonah sit there and wilt in the Assyrian sun? I suspect not. God had invested a lot of TLC in teaching this man His heart, His ways and His mind. When confronted with the lessons of a God who loved Him, Jonah tended to respond. I more strongly suspect that Jonah got up and walked away with a better handle on the grace of God and a deeper sympathy for those who do not know Him.

We cannot be sure about Jonah, but what about you? God's wrath will always give way to His love if human repentance will cry out for mercy. Maybe you need to believe that truth if you are not a Christian. Maybe you need to accept that truth if you are a Christian whose life is riddled with fear and doubt about whether God can possibly keep forgiving you. Maybe we all need to embrace that truth a little better, so that we can better present it to those dying in their sins.

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