

# Jonah: Now That I'm Here I Don't Like It!

Series: God's Runaway

by Ron R.Ritchie

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When God called Jonah to a ministry to an enemy of the Israelite people, Jonah said, "You can't get there from here," and he went the other way. Jonah at one time had had a successful ministry with the nation of Israel, a ministry in which he brought good news to a wicked king, Jeroboam the second. He told the king that God was going to bless the wicked Israelites; that he was going to relieve them from the affliction, the oppression and the bitterness they were experiencing. God would allow Jeroboam to destroy the Syrian army, take Damascus and extend the borders of Israel back to where David and Solomon had established them 150 years earlier.

But Jonah struggled with this second call that God had given him whereby he was asked to go to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and tell the Assyrians, these wicked and violent people, these idolators, that God loved them, and if they would but repent, he would accept them and save them. This was just too much for Jonah, so he got on a ship at Joppa and sought to hide from God, only to discover that God was much bigger than the hold of a ship.

A great storm arose and the crew members, after praying to their gods, woke Jonah as their gods weren't working. Maybe Jonah's God would save them, they thought. They then cast lots and discovered that Jonah was the one causing the storm. So Jonah told them who he was, that he was a Hebrew, that he was of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that he was trying to hide from God. Of course, the crew members didn't believe this. How do you hide from God? Even they couldn't understand this.

Jonah's solution to the dilemma of the great storm was to have himself cast into the sea, for he knew that if he were, God would save the crew. So they cast him into the sea after crying to God to forgive them for this innocent blood and the moment they did so, the sea stopped its raging, and the crew members, these idolatrous worshipers, came to know the Lord; they worshiped him and made sacrifices and vows that they would serve him. In the midst of this prophet's disobedience, a whole ship's crew came to know the Lord.

So a great fish is appointed by God to swallow Jonah. As we said last week, we are not sure what kind of fish it was. The fish is really not the issue, but its swallowing Jonah is. He was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights and it was during this time that he prayed to the Lord and praised him. (Though his view was very bad, his thinking was quite clear!)

The miracle of the whole thing is the fact that the fish didn't digest Jonah, but he vomited him out onto the dry land, as it says here, and there he lay on the beach, crying, no doubt, "which way to Nineveh?" This is where our story opens this morning, in chapter 3.

## God's Warning

**Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. (That was a lot better than last time!) Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**

In Genesis 10 we are told that Nimrod built the city of Nineveh and during all those years it had continued to grow bigger. (The city proper was something like San Francisco, with three smaller cities surrounding it, like Daly City, Pacifica and Millbrae.) In Jonah's time Nineveh was about to become the capital of the Assyrian

Empire which, in 726 B.C., would take Israel into captivity and become the ruler of the world until Babylon became strong.

So Jonah comes to the city and finds over six hundred thousand people going about their business. He finds within the city all kinds of shrines and temples; he discovers that the Ninevites love astrology and they love the gods. He goes through the city, which is majestic in his eyes, for about a day and a half, after completing a 500-mile journey across high mountains and desert plains, and he proclaims a message to the people.

Now the people are the issue in this story. God loves these wicked Assyrians even though they are hung up on all kinds of astrology and pagan worship. They had water gods and land gods; they had sky gods and wind gods, but they were forever under fear, because the gods they created in their minds were like people--they were greedy and demanding; they loved sacrifice; they had husbands and wives and children. Their gods controlled their destiny, so the Ninevites were forever trying to appease them. So in a true sense they were religious people; they were very conscious of the other world; they were very aware of powers and beings and destiny; they were very aware of the stars and how they moved in the heavens.

Now Jonah walks into all of this, under the command of God, and says, "Guess what? In forty days, if you don't repent, the God of the universe, who is over all these other gods, is going to destroy this city and all the people in it." How would you feel if someone came to Palo Alto and said, "In forty days, one month and ten days from now, on March 15, there will be no Palo Alto unless everyone here repents of his wicked ways"? Now it is a little more real; now it is a little more serious. "What about my children? What about my husband? What about my wife? What about... ?"

Then the strangest thing happens (verse 5):

### **The People Respond to The God Of The Universe**

**Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. And he Issued a proclamation and It said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let man call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?"**

Now what is it about Jonah that made six hundred thousand people and the king repent? Well, I offer you two suggestions. One, God loves all mankind. God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to have a knowledge of him, and he moves in a most mysterious way among men and women. You have seen it in your own lives. People you never thought would come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are sitting next to you in this church. You can't believe it yourself! People in your office you never thought would come to know Jesus Christ are sitting there as Christians, because God loves them and worked in a mysterious way. You see it happening around you all the time. In the news you see all the born-again people and you say, "Wait a minute! What's going on in our country?" The commentators can't figure out what it means to be born again. (They tried to explain it one night on television and it was tragic! For 15 minutes they tried to explain what born again meant. They went around and around in circles and came up with nothing, except that it was a nice religious thing and people ought to do it.)

Well, the second thing that caused their repentance, I suggest, is that I think that Jonah looked strange. Let me explain. There is some evidence that in the late 1800's a sailor fell overboard and was swallowed by a great fish of the shark family. Two days later the shark was caught in a net. He was brought on board, cut open, and the man was found alive. There was only one difference about him, and that was that somehow the fish's digestive juices (which hadn't got to him totally), had burned off his first layer of skin so that every feature of the man was white, and he stayed that way for the rest of his life.

It may be that the same thing happened to Jonah. You can imagine this albino man, who is Jewish, coming to the great city of Nineveh where the sun beats down constantly (and we will see how the sun gets to him in the next chapter). You can imagine people saying, "Who are you? How come you're so white? You look strange to us." And Jonah says, "Funny you should mention it . . . Forty days, and God is going to wipe this city out unless you repent. To prove that there is a God, and to prove that he is alive, and to prove that he's going to do it, let me tell you my story. I was on a ship, running from God, and a great storm came up and I knew it was from God. When the crew found out that the storm was because of me, they cast me into the sea. I remember, just before I went under, that the whole sea was calm. So I know there is a God. Then this great fish came and swallowed me. While I was in the belly of the fish I repented of my sin of running from God, and I am here today to tell you that God is going to destroy you unless you repent of your wicked ways! "

I don't know about you, but if I was a Ninevite, I would say, "Hey, I believe!" So God, moving in the hearts of men in his mysterious way, perhaps moved in the sign of Jonah. In Luke 11 it says that Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh as Jesus Christ was a sign to his people, and as you and I are signs today of Christ in us, signs to our generation, as Jonah was a sign to his generation. I hope we don't all have to go through the fish to get the point! Verse 10,

**When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.**

Of course God is God, so he knew all that the Ninevites were going to do, and he knew all that Jonah was going to do, and God, in patience and love, waited for Jonah because he had already prepared the hearts of these people. They turned from their wicked ways, and, it says, God turned from destroying them. This is a human term. We talk about God turning, changing his mind, but in reality he doesn't change his mind; he knew exactly what was going to happen.

Now right in the middle of all this you would think that Jonah would rejoice. He had been obedient (after the fish experience); he went to Nineveh and did exactly what God had told him to do, so you'd think his heart would be bursting with joy that the God of the universe worked among men and he had the privilege of seeing it all. The word had got to the king, and the king even had the animals sit in ashes! That's how repentant the king was.

### **Do You Have A Good Reason To Be Angry?**

**But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry.**

Isn't that twice we've seen this? Wasn't there a "But Jonah" in chapter one?

**And he prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said While I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better for me than life." And the Lord said, "Do you have a good reason to be angry?"**

Suddenly we get the clue to the whole book in Jonah's reason for running away. He says, "Lord, I sought to go to Tarshish because I really tried to stop your whole plan; I tried to forestall it. If I got to Tarshish I could hide for a long time and maybe by then the Ninevites would be destroyed by the Babylonians or somebody, and then I could go back. I knew you'd forgive me and it would be OK." Isn't that amazing? Jonah tried to forestall the plan of God. He tried to put it aside.

In telling his reason for doing this, he lines up for us five characteristics of God. The first one is, "You know why I did it, Lord? Because I know you're a gracious God. I knew you'd be gracious to those Assyrians. I

knew you'd relent. I knew you wouldn't destroy the city." To be a gracious God is to do things out of love for people when they expect nothing and when it isn't merited.

I remember a couple of years ago I went to a toy store to get two toys for my sons, whom I love. I got two nice tanks (the kind I really like, they spit out fire!) I put them in a bag and couldn't wait to get home to share them. When my sons were small we had this game where they would close their eyes and put their hand in a bag and whatever they touched was theirs. So one son reached in the bag and pulled out the tank and said, "Oh, that's great, Dad," and gave me a kiss. He opened the box and soon had the tank running all over the place. My other son was sitting there with his box in front of him, but he wasn't moving. In his characteristic way he said, "Dad, can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure, what is it?" He said, "Why did you buy this for me? You don't know whether I've been good or bad today." Because I understand God now (to a degree) I said to him, "Son, I didn't buy that tank for you because you were good or bad; I bought that tank for you because I love you. I was thinking about you all day and I wanted to do something that would please you." He said, "Oh!" and jumped up, opened the box, and played with the tank. That's what graciousness is, and that is the kind of God we have, a gracious God.

The second characteristic Jonah mentions is compassion, "I knew you were a compassionate God." That's another form of love--mercy. It is expressing love toward those who deserve nothing. It is pictured so well in the story of the good Samaritan. It is pictured so well in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Mercy is something we don't know enough about in our experience. It is hard to extend mercy as a lifestyle, but God extends it to us all the time.

One of the best illustrations of mercy on a human level I have heard recently came from Patrick Cunningham, who works in our publishing department here at PBC as an editor. He told me that he and two other staff members, Gary Crouch and Mike Johnson, visited Vacaville prison with three men, two ex-cons and an ex-prison guard, who have a ministry to the prisoners there called Christian Fellowship. Bobby, the ex-guard, while working as a guard in a prison a few years ago was brutally beaten by a convict. He was out of work for six months due to his injuries but he convinced the governor of the prison to allow him to go back there as a full-time, unpaid Christian witness. He subsequently led his attacker, now held in solitary confinement, to the Lord, and he now has a ministry to these prisoners in solitary. Bobby has a three-legged milking stool that he sits on outside their cell doors and he puts his hand through the little opening in the door where the food is put. He tells how the men in these cells grab his hand, their first contact with another human in months. Then he moves to the next cell and does the same thing. His whole ministry is touching and sharing the Gospel with men who have no *other* contact with humanity. Do you *think* they listen to him when he tells them about Jesus Christ? That's compassion. I thought I knew what compassion was. I don't know anything yet, but through men like Bobby, who allows Christ to show his compassion through him, I'm learning what it means to be compassionate; to reach out to those who deserve nothing.

In Psalm 103 there is a beautiful section on compassion that will encourage your hearts. This is a Psalm of praise for God's mercy. Verses 6-14,

**The Lord performs righteous deeds,  
And judgments for all who are oppressed.  
He made known His ways to Moses,  
His acts to the sons of Israel.  
The Lord is compassionate and gracious,  
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.  
He will not always strive with us;  
Nor will He keep His anger forever.  
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.  
For high as the heavens are above the earth,  
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
Just as a father has compassion on his children,**

**So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.  
For He Himself knows our frame;  
He is mindful that we are but dust.**

Many times we create a picture of God that is not scriptural. Either he is a great cop who is chasing us and blowing the whistle on us and seeking to beat us with his nightstick, or he's an angry father who never lets up, who's always after us. I never heard of the God of Psalm 103 when I was growing up. Had I heard, I wouldn't be willing to believe it, based on my experience. But Jonah says, "God, I know why you didn't wipe out the Ninevites: because you are a gracious God; you're a compassionate God. And third, "You're slow to anger." That means he is long-suffering.

"You are abundant in lovingkindness," Jonah says, the fourth characteristic. I like to picture this by telling what happens when I do the wash. I use two cups of detergent and the bubbles come, and the bubbles come, and the bubbles come, and the voice comes out of the bubbles, "Help, honey, where are you?" That is my picture of lovingkindness--love that heaps all over you; love that keeps bubbling and bubbling and bubbling up. That's what this means--abundant, full.

Fifth, Jonah says, God is "One who relents concerning calamity." He is willing to accept men and women who see where they have gone wrong and repent of their ways; he is ready to start all over again as though it had never happened. I have learned with my children (because God has taught me), that when they make mistakes, never to say, "That was the second time, or that was the fourth time you did that." Each time, because of Psalm 103 and these characteristics of God, we try to say, "This is the first time." We don't want to keep bringing it up, because God doesn't keep bringing it up.

Now the obvious answer to the Lord's question, "Do you have a good reason to be angry?" is "no," but Jonah is not about to say that. Verse 5,

### **God Appoints A Plant To grow Over Jonah**

**Then Jonah went out from the cite and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.**

This must have happened some time during those forty days. Nothing had happened to the city yet, and Jonah was hoping that maybe God would not relent, he would wipe it out, and Jonah would have a great view from there. Verse 6,

**So the Lord God appointed a plant and It grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and It attacked the plant and it withered.**

I love that! You can see this worm just doing his own thing, minding his own business, and God comes along, looks at the plant, looks at Jonah, and says, "I've got to do something. Worm, I appoint you to go over there and destroy that plant." I can hear the worm say, "Whatever you say!" So the worm marches over, comes back and says, "I did exactly what you said." (I can hear God saying, "I wish Jonah would do that!") Verse 8.

**And It came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, [He has all of nature at his command] and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with ail his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**

That's the way we react (at least I do) when God doesn't do it our way. This is called "biblical thumbsucking." "When God doesn't do it my way, I'd just as soon die. What is the use? I can't go on! This is not the way I planned it, and therefore, it is better to be home with the Lord. " (I suspect I am saying that for myself.) We all struggle with that, one way or another. Our children don't turn out exactly the way we want them; our marriages aren't exactly the way we want them; our jobs are not exactly what we prayed for, so we get angry with God and say we'd rather die. We'd rather give up, quit. What's the use?

## God's Second Question

**Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have a good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."**

This guy is different, isn't he? I would have said, "Lord, I've got it! When I watched that worm and the plant and the east wind, I got it. I don't have any questions, God; do whatever you want." No, he keeps on; he's persistent. He's got more courage than three of me; courage--or something else!

Now here's the key to the passage (verse 10),

**Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you could not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons [children] who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"**

"Jonah, your priorities are all mixed up. You're all caught up in material things; you're all caught up in the temporal. The most important thing to you is not people but a tree that gives shade, a tree that is no longer with us. You've put all your cookies in that basket. Meanwhile you want me to go and destroy six hundred thousand people because you don't like them; because they've been wicked to Israel; because they've been wicked to Syria; because they might be a world-power one of these days you want me to wipe them out. Jonah, I can have compassion on anyone I want to, and I have compassion on the Ninevites. I love all men, and I love these people living in Nineveh. I love the children who don't know the difference between their right and left hand, and I love the animals. I don't want to destroy them either."

There are so many things this can teach us that I had trouble pulling them all out, but I would like to come back to what I said last week, that God has called us to be ministers of reconciliation. We are to go and give the good news to all of those around us. We are to understand that God is dwelling in us and that he desires to express his love through us to everyone we meet. God loves everyone you see as you drive home today, everyone you meet this week, as much as he loves you. That is shocking to realize sometimes, isn't it? There are a lot of people you and I don't like, but God loves them, and is willing to accept them if they will turn from their wicked ways. Can you believe that? He is ready and willing to do that.

In conclusion, I think there are three things to remember from this book. One, God desires for us to see the whole world as he sees it; to see that the people who don't know the difference between their right and left hand are the victims of the enemy, not the enemy. The second thing is that God's desire is for us to be available so he can express his compassion toward those people through us. And third, God desires for us to be a sign in our generation. We're to be men and women who have the resurrected Jesus Christ living within us, and the resurrected Jesus Christ is the One who brings life out of death, and he is willing to bring life out of death to everyone around you if you are available.

Our heavenly Father, we have so much to learn. We pray that you would be pleased to teach us how to walk in newness of life, without fear of people. Teach us the responsibility we have to be a sign in our generation, because Jesus Christ lives within us. Thank you so much that you did love those people who lived in Nineveh; that one day we're going to meet the king and everyone else who accepted you. Thank you so much that the Assyrians are our brothers and sisters, because of your love and compassion, your grace and your abundant lovingkindness. Teach us your ways, we pray, in Jesus' name, amen.

Ron R. Ritchie

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