

## The Turnaround Prophet

Jonah was not happy. In fact, Jonah was most displeased, disillusioned, and determined not to be an instrument of the Lord's mercy to the horrible human inhabitants of Nineveh, who unquestionably deserved to get what was otherwise coming to them. So Jonah packed his bags and looked for the first opportunity to get as far away from the presence and the purposes of the Lord as he possibly could.

Pick someone who really deserves to get what's coming to him (or her), a poor excuse for a human being who really makes your skin crawl, who causes good people to rightly recoil in horror. Fill an ancient metropolis with one hundred and twenty thousand people who make your skin crawl, and what you have is a shamelessly idolatrous Nineveh—reveling and rejoicing in its depravity. What you have is Nineveh. But look who ends up later being hurled into the depths. It's not the Ninevites. It's the prophet of Almighty God, Jonah.

Sometimes God's love for the loveless, for those who don't deserve it, seems ever so adorable. Good for God! What a good God He is! Isn't the God of the forlorn wonderful? Sometimes God seem unfailingly endearing, but sometimes He and His ways are just plain unnerving and unsettling. Sometimes God's love for the loveless is nothing short of shocking. You mean He loves them all? You mean He actually earnestly longs to extend his love and forgiveness to all? Even the ugliest of the ugly, the most reprehensible of them all? All of them? Really?

So Jonah "rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" because He could not fathom, could in no way embrace, that kind of God. So he rose to flee, he rose to refuse and abandon it all, and in doing so, he joined those that he loathed—those who deserve God's punishment. So Jonah was hurled into the depths, so that he might know, so that he might first be rescued, so that he might repent and believe, so that he might come to his senses, or, at least, so that he might come to see that God's way must have its day.

And the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land, and the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "OK, one more time, Arise and go to Nineveh." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord, not because he especially wanted to, not because he now possessed the heart of his God for the Ninevites. Have you noticed how often the will of God takes us in directions that we would have never chosen for ourselves? Have you noticed? Jonah noticed, and he goes—as you and I must sometimes go—not because he understands why, not because he knows the best way to go, not even because in his heart of hearts he sympathizes, but because God's way must have its day.

So Jonah "called out...and the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. And when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."

That's right. He did not do it. In this we see the lengths to which our God is willing to go for the good, the bad, and yes, the ugly. The Lord our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. If his love is for some, his love is for all. The attractive and the appalling and all points in between.

Thanks be to God, it doesn't matter who the sinner is, God's way must have its day.

Now so far, we've been painting the story of Jonah in fairly broad strokes, so let's add some detail. It's easy to sit back and talk about Jonah's reluctance to carry out God's will. What's not so easy—and at the same time is absolutely necessary—is for you to use

Jonah as a kind of mirror—to see in his reflection your own reluctance to let God’s way have its day in you. In other words, we each have our own way in which we’re running off to Tarshish instead of going to Nineveh.

You know that God has claimed you as His own child, BUT you don’t want to stick out, you don’t want to be different, you don’t want to be labeled as a goody-two shoes Bible thumper.

You know that God has called you to be the best husband or wife you can be, BUT really, it’s your own needs and desires that matter to you most. And that’s not just for husbands and wives, but sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, you name it. Friends, acquaintances.

God says, “Go to the Nineveh of loving me above all else and love your neighbor as yourself.” We flee to the Tarshish of “I love myself first, and everyone else needs to wait in line.”

You know that God wants His people to extend radical forgiveness to those who wrong us, BUT the mercy that’s so easy for you to accept for yourself seems so hard to release to others.

You strongly suspect that God wants to use you to serve His creation, BUT it’s just easier and more comfortable—not to mention more fun—to build my life around me. Is this striking a chord? God says, “Go to Nineveh,” so what do we do? We pull out our GPS and look for somewhere in the opposite direction. It’s what we do as sinners. And the result was, for Jonah at least, being tossed overboard into the depths of the sea. That’s where it’s always heading when you run off to Tarshish instead of heading for Nineveh. You sink. And here’s something to chew on: God is not above using a big fish incident to get your attention, and to get you back on track. He’ll do it if He has to.

Is there any solution to this? There is—one. Another prophet was thrown into the depths, but this prophet had no sin or shame to speak of. He had no reluctance to carry out God’s way. In fact, He was totally obedient to His Father. That’s how he ended up in the depths. On the cross of Golgotha, Jesus drowned in sin, totally abandoned and alone. Our refusal to speak for God, our refusal to love others more than self, our refusal to forgive, our refusal to go to Nineveh, and a whole host of other refusals put Jesus there, under an ocean of selfishness. For three days, Jesus stayed in the belly of the earth, swallowed up by death. This is what you and I had coming to us, but He jumped in it instead. It counts for you. And then on Easter Sunday, Jesus’ physical resurrection demonstrates that He conquered death. He changed it forever. Life is Jesus’ gift to give, a risen, victorious confident life in the face of the primal fear of death. Life is Jesus’ gift to give, a new and re-directed life; an actual renovation and rebirth that changes what’s important to us. What does that mean? It means this. If you believe Jesus died for you and rose again for you and still lives for you, you will gladly and willingly want to do hard things to serve God. You will actually find yourself wanting to go to Nineveh, crazy as it sounds. All those refusals will start to reverse themselves, not because we fear punishment, but because we love Jesus; we love what He did for us; we love how He reveals our Father’s heart. We come to believe that God’s way must have its day, but not just that. We come to trust, in the very core of our being, that God’s way is best, and that He deserves our allegiance and love and thanks.