

"THE ULTIMATE FISH STORY!"

Jonah 4: 1-11

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Jonah decides not to obey God. First of all, we read in chapter one that Jonah is asked to preach a type of 'fire and brimstone' sermon to the people of Nineveh. Jonah thought that generally in the Old Testament when harsh judgement was preached against a nation, the nation would soon be destroyed. Jonah, however, was not interested and decided to do his own thing and flee in the other direction. It was almost like Jonah would rather die than obey God's request. These people of Nineveh acted in a terrible way. They were brutal and a threat to the Israelite people. As far as Jonah was concerned, the people of Nineveh were not worth it.

We know how the story develops - Jonah is thrown into the sea and scooped up by a whale (big fish). Similarly, if we wander away from God, God wants to get our attention. He wants to bring us back to the right road for his Kingdom, not our own Kingdom. When have you gone in the opposite direction and the Lord has brought you back?

Jonah is thankful for his life. Jonah offers up to God the prayer of Thanksgiving as we find in Jonah 2. The prayer is definitely a prayer of faith in God's deliverance. In the prayer, Jonah is thankful that his life is spared. However, he does not say in the prayer that he is sorry for disobeying God. Certainly, it is clear that Jonah is joyful because of his deliverance from 'Sheol' (the dark fish belly). Furthermore, he gets the message that God means what he says, and Jonah agrees to do as God says. Jonah, however, does not seem to have a change of heart.

What is the book of Jonah about? This book of the Bible certainly does illustrate the Grace of God. Regardless of the evil and brutality of the people of Nineveh, God had compassion for them and gave them a second chance when they repented. However, the message of this book goes further than this. It has to do with the heart of Jonah himself.

The following quote from Jonah 4: 2,3 will shed some light on Jonah's perspective: *"He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."* Jonah knew that God was gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness. He knew that God was one who relents from doing harm. He did not want God to show his compassion on Nineveh. In Jonah's view, the Assyrian people should not receive a blessing and be forgiven! Jonah is basically disagreeing with how God is handling things. In Jonah's view, God's love is great when it is directed towards the people of Israel and Jonah. Now God was showing loving kindness to Israel's enemies and they didn't deserve it! This makes Jonah very angry. Jonah is so disagreeable with what God is doing, he would rather die. Jonah's heart needs healing.

God's question to Jonah: In Jonah 4: 4 we read God's question to Jonah, *"And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'"* This is a question God asks us sometimes when we think our way is better than God's. God had every right to kill Jonah because of Jonah's disobedience. In fact God had more right to kill Jonah than he did the people of Nineveh, because Jonah knew God's righteous requirements but disobeyed God anyway. The people of Nineveh did not know, and although they were living in sin, they were ignorant of God's requirements. Now that they knew and had repented, God had turned his wrath away from them. Jonah had not repented from his sin, yet God was still patient and gracious with him! Jonah does not answer God's question, but goes away to the edge of the city feeling sorry for himself.

God's second question to Jonah: In Jonah 4: 9 we read, *"But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?'"* This is the same as the first question, except with the added part about the plant. I think Jonah answered this time because the question was not about the people but about the plant (Jonah loved the plant more than the people). Jonah is definitely angry with God for being gracious and forgiving to a people who do not deserve it. Jonah was not repentant and the story ends that way.

The story leaves us hanging. All we know is that the story ends with no resolution from Jonah to God. Jonah had been upset with God because he was surprised by grace. Jonah was shamed by grace, but did not surrender to grace as the people of Nineveh surrendered (Jonah was obedient and finally submitted to God's instructions, but he was not sorry for his actions). Like a child that didn't get what he wanted, Jonah sulked. Jonah knew very little about the height of God's love and depths of His mercy. Jonah's idea of judgement was pointing the finger against the city of Nineveh and hoping for its demise. God's idea for judgment, on the other hand, was a Father's words of judgement for the city but at the same time embracing the city, hoping for its salvation.

I believe this is the ultimate fish story because it encapsulates who we are and who God is. We see ourselves in Jonah when we are disobedient to what God wants for our lives and we proceed to do our own thing. We also see who God is--...*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing* (Jonah 4: 2b). The nature of God in this story is totally in line with our God in Jesus Christ who forgave even his enemies as they crucified him (Luke 23: 34). Jesus also said as we find it in Matthew 5: 43,44, ⁴³*"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'* ⁴⁴*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."*

We find ourselves in the story and that is why it leaves us hanging. We are often the same person as Jonah. Author and theologian, Eugene Peterson said that is probably why we resonate with this Biblical Story so much – we find ourselves in it! This connection with Jonah actually makes us more like participants than spectators in the story.

Jonah certainly believed in God and enjoyed God's grace towards him, but was not ready to dispense it to others-especially if they did not deserve it! Jonah disagreed with God. If God was running as a candidate in an election at the time of Jonah, I don't think Jonah would have voted for God. Would you? Are you ready to repent? Amen.