

Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10
A Whale of a Tale
11.10.24

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJFG0CszpJ8>

Ok, so there you have it!

Where once it would have been impossible to believe
A person could be swallowed by a whale and survive
We now have proof that it is possible.

Now, having said that, three days in the belly of a fish
Well, that is another thing.

For those who get hung up
On the literal/historical aspects of Jonah, don't.

The story of Jonah is much more than
Than proving a person can be swallowed by a fish.

It is a story that offers hope
That though the people of Israel were chosen
By God to be a great nation

All people, all nations are God's ultimate concern.

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As it goes, in biblical history
Most who are called to be God's spokespersons
Are reluctant to take on the role.

Isaiah and Jeremiah both come to mind.

Jonah was not reluctant
He just, flat out, wouldn't hear of it.

He ran from God's calling
As fast and as far away as he could go.

The Book of Jonah is a wonderful OT lesson.

From beginning to end
It is filled with the graces of God.

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You know the story.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh

Jonah replied, "No way"!

Instead, Jonah fled in the opposite direction.

It angered him that God should send him
To Nineveh, Israel's hated enemy.

He boards a ship bound for the farthest place
He could go from Nineveh, Tarshish

Despite a not-so-subtle message from God
In the form of a furious storm
Jonah fell fast asleep.

When they woke him
He told them he was responsible for God's anger

And if they throw him overboard
The storm would calm.

They were sympathetic towards him
And tried to get to shore before the ship sank.

But in desperation, they finally threw him overboard

Jonah is swallowed by a fish
And vomited onto land three days later.

After all this, the still reluctant prophet Jonah goes
“Ok, ok, I get it, I get it already!”

Jonah goes to Nineveh and warns them.

And the people took it to heart
And they turned to God and repented.

Even the king of Nineveh
Was smitten by the word of God and repented

The king proclaimed a fast for the whole nation
Including livestock as well.

How about that for a fast?

Everyone and everything had to wear sackcloth
And cry mightily to the LORD.

It must have been quite the trick
To get sackcloth on a big old bull!

In his decree, the king feels God's judgment

Jonah 3:9 NIV

⁹“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

And God does just that.

According to

The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Jonah 3:10 NRSV

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God **CHANGED HIS MIND** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.

The Common English Bible puts it this way

Jonah 3:10 CEB

¹⁰ God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So, God **STOPPED PLANNING TO DESTROY THEM**, and he didn't do it.

The New International Version says

Jonah 3:10 NIV

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, **HE RELENTED** and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

And how about the King James Version

Jonah 3:10 KJV

¹⁰ And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and GOD REPENTED OF THE EVIL, THAT HE HAD SAID THAT HE WOULD DO UNTO THEM; and he did it not.

I show different translations for you to get the idea
That it is not an easy phrase to translate
Both linguistically and theologically

Because a part of our understanding
Of God's attributable qualities
Is God's immutability, his changelessness.

God's will, God's character, God's promises
Are steadfast.

So, when the text says God changed his mind
What are we to think?
First of all, God's unchanging nature
Is a cornerstone of our faith.

While Scripture speaks of God 'changing His mind'
This is not a contradiction.

Instead, it reflects God's responsiveness
To human repentance.

Omniscient God, knowing all things, allows his actions
To be influenced by human choices.

This doesn't diminish God's sovereignty
But instead, highlights God's mercy and grace.

God's character remains steadfast
Yet flexible dealing with humanity.

To say God changed his mind
Is anthropomorphic in nature

We cannot fully understand God's exact nature
But the core message of the passage is clear.

And Jonah says so

Jonah 4:2b CEB

**“I know that you are a merciful and compassionate
God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not
to destroy.”**

God wants Jonah to understand that
God shows mercy and grace to all peoples
Even those we think unworthy of God's mercy.

To Jonah, the Ninevites were God's sworn enemies
Why would God offer grace to them?

It angered Jonah.

So angered, in fact, he sat down to die.

Jonah 4:4 NIV

4 But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah left the city and laid down on a hill

Overlooking the city to see what God would do.

And God, in his mercy

Appointed a bush to offer small shade to Jonah
From the hot, blazing sun.

Jonah was happy to have the bush.

Then God took it away.

That made Jonah even angrier

Jonah 4:9 NIV

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

Jonah 4:10-11 NLT

10 Then the Lord said, “You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly.

11 But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”

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We’ve become callous

To the slaughter of innocent people.

Palestine, case in point

Has been inflicted by immeasurable suffering.

And yet, since they are an enemy of our ally, Israel

We pay little attention to it.

Jonah's anger toward the loss of his shade bush

Shows an extremely narrow view

Of God's great mercy.

Jonah was perfectly happy, personally

To be the beneficiary of God's mercy

But when it came to Nineveh

And his hated enemies, the Assyrians

Jonah was enraged God could show them mercy.

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We must see the larger picture.

God is merciful, even to our enemies.

Psalm 136:1 Evangelical Heritage Version

¹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

For his mercy endures forever

We have no right to be angry

When our enemies aren't wiped off the earth.

But God is concerned for all.

Jonah suffered what I would call nationalism

He was patriot. Sure
But he was also nationalist.

The difference?

Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; ***nationalism***, is when hate for people other than your own comes first.”

(<https://theconversation.com/what-is-the-difference-between-nationalism-and-patriotism-208170>)

God's mercy takes no sides

Jonah asks,

“Don't I have a right to be angry at God for sparing my enemy.”

God replies

“Don't I have a right to be merciful even to those you consider enemies?”

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Think about a sports event.

Both teams gather to pray, each seeking victory.

Do we really believe God will takes sides?

Can we truly ask God to bless our team over another?

No

God's love and mercy extend to all, even to our rivals.

The question is, can anyone be angry at God
Whose mercy knows no national boundaries?

Whose compassion is for all peoples?

Whose love extends to all corners of the earth?

Whose Son's love and redemption is for all humanity?

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Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:43-45 NRSV

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,

⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

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I love the USA.

Its geography is diverse and stunning.

Its people even more so.

Its democratic government a model for other nations.

I feel fortunate to be its citizen.

Privileged to vote in last week's election
Free from fraud and corruption.

We are blessed by God.

But God blesses other nations too
And seeks to bless all nations

The hymn, "This Is My Song" poetically says it

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine*

*But other lands have sunlight too, and clover
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine*

*So hear my song, O God of all the nations
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*
Jonah learned his lesson . . . the hard way.

Let's pray we don't have to learn it that way.

Remember

John 3:16 NIV

¹⁶ For God so loved the **WORLD that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

