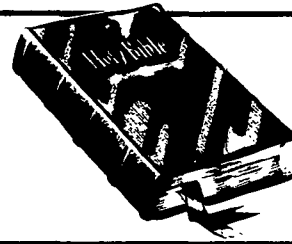


Jonah, the Reluctant Prophet



The Bible Corner Cindy Cottone

"Hurry! Throw more cargo overboard!" the captain shouted over the howling winds.

"Yes, sir!" replied the first mate. "But Captain, I must tell you that we have very little cargo left on the ship. If this storm keeps up much longer, I don't think the ship will hold!"

The captain was very worried, but he said nothing. In all his years of sailing the open seas, he'd never seen such a fierce storm. It was almost as if an unknown force raged against them. He had seen each of his shipmates praying to their different gods. The captain had prayed, too. But still the storm showed no sign of letting up.

"Captain, I can't believe it!" cried one of the crew members. That man who boarded the ship in Joppa still sleeps below!"

"Impossible!" the captain answered. "Bring this man to me at once."

When the sailor came back with the man, the captain roared, "How is it that you manage to sleep at a time like this? Don't you know what danger we are in? Get up now and pray to your god, if you even have one!"

The man's name was Jonah. He was a prophet, someone chosen by God to bring His message to the people.

"Sir, I am a Jew, and my God is Jehovah," Jonah replied. "I thought that I could run away and hide from Him. This storm is all my fault."

"What have you done that your God brings such wrath upon us?" asked the captain.

Jonah replied, "A few days ago God told me to go down to the wicked city of Nineveh. He wanted me to tell the people there that He was going to destroy their city because of all their sins against Him."

"And so why haven't you done what your God has commanded?" said the captain.

"These people, the Ninevites, have persecuted the people of Israel for many years," Jonah answered. "They are a cruel and evil people. Why should I preach God's message to them?"

The captain was dumbstruck. How powerful was this God, Jehovah, that even the winds and the seas obeyed Him?

"Captain," Jonah continued, "you have no choice but to throw me overboard into the sea and save yourself and the others."

"We'll give it some more time. Perhaps the storm will yet be quieted. Keep rowing, men!" the captain ordered.

But try as they did to steady the ship, the waves grew bigger and the winds blew even stronger than before. It looked as though the ship would break apart from the force of the storm. Jonah went to the captain again and finally convinced him to throw Jonah into the raging sea. Just as quickly as the storm had begun, it ended. As soon as everything had calmed down, the captain told his men to kneel down and pray to Jonah's God.

"Oh, Jehovah," the captain prayed, "now we know that You are the one true God. Please do not be angry with us for Jonah's death, for it is not our fault that You sent this storm. From this day on, we will worship only You."

Meanwhile, Jonah was terrified as he sank deeper and deeper into the dark waters of the sea. He knew now that God was very angry because he had run away.

"Oh, Lord," Jonah prayed. "I have sinned against You by my disobedience. Please forgive me."

It was so dark that Jonah could hardly see at all. But what he did see filled him with more terror than death itself. An enormous fish came toward him, opened its huge mouth and swallowed Jonah!

Jonah remained in the stomach of this fish for three days. On the third day he prayed, "Thank you, Lord, for sparing my life. I promise to obey You in all I do and say."

All at once the fish opened its huge mouth, and Jonah was swept out of the dark cavern of its stomach. He landed on dry land just outside Nineveh. The

Lord asked Jonah a second time to go and preach His message to the Ninevites, and this time, Jonah did go, as he had promised.

Nineveh was a huge city in Assyria. It took Jonah three days to walk through the entire city. On the very first day, he went to the king and gave him this message from the Lord: "God has seen your wickedness. He is tired of your false gods. In 40 days, God will destroy all of Nineveh."

The king believed Jonah, and he sent this proclamation to be read to all of the people from one end of Nineveh to the other: "God is going to punish us and destroy our city. We must fast and pray and repent of our sins. Maybe there is still time to show God that we are sorry, and He will let us live. From this day on, we will neither eat nor drink. Even our animals will be part of the fast."

When Jonah saw the people fasting, he went to the outskirts of town. He hated the people of Nineveh. They had been cruel to his people, the Jews. And now Jonah couldn't wait until God punished them.

But when God saw that the Ninevites were truly sorry for their sins, He decided not to punish them. Instead, God forgave them.

Jonah was very angry. He built himself a little makeshift hut, and he sat and sulked. "I wish I were dead!" Jonah cried bitterly.

God said nothing to Jonah. As Jonah sat and sulked, God had a huge vine grow up from the ground in a very short time. This vine sprouted thick, green leaves that shaded the little house from the sun. Still Jonah sat now in the cool shade, and still he pouted.

Next, God sent a worm to eat through the stem of the vine, and very soon the plant withered and died. The sun grew hotter and hotter, and a scorching wind blew and blew on Jonah.

Finally Jonah cried out again. "Yes, even death would be better for me than

this!"

So God answered Jonah, "Are you angry, Jonah, because the plant died?"

"Yes, I am very angry! In fact, I am angry enough to die!" Jonah answered.

"Jonah, you are sorry for a plant that died after only a few days. You did nothing at all to create this plant. So why then should I not have pity on the people of Nineveh? I have cared for them all of their lives, and now they have turned to Me and are sorry for their sins."

And finally Jonah stopped sulking, and he understood.

For discussion:

- 1) What was the unknown force that caused the huge storm?
- 2) What was the other name that Jonah used to refer to God?
- 3) What was Jonah's sin? Can you run away from God?
- 4) Why didn't Jonah want God to spare the Ninevites?
- 5) Why did God forgive the people of Nineveh?
- 6) Is God only for a select few people? Why or why not?
- 7) What did Jonah understand about God at the end of the story?

For Lent:

Sometimes it is very hard to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply. Jonah thought God should punish the Ninevites because they had hurt the people of Israel. Jesus forgave those who had crucified Him. Is there someone who has really hurt you? Ask God to help you forgive this person.

For further reading:

- 1) The story of Jonah is found in the Old Testament in the Book Of Jonah.
- 2) When we fast or give things up for Lent, it is an outward sign of an inward change of heart. Sometimes we can have the wrong motives for fasting. Read Matthew 6:16-18 to see what Jesus said about fasting.

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