

IT'S ALL BACKWARDS!, JONAH 1

Jonah: A man, A fish, and God's Grace

◆**Intro:** Most folks have heard the story of Jonah and the whale. Of course it probably wasn't a whale, the hebrew says "big fish", and a whale is a mammal. But anyway, like Moby Dick, and Pinocchio, it's a story even kids know. How would you sum it up? Jonah runs from God, gets thrown into the sea, swallowed by a fish, spit up on land and has to do what God said after all! What was he thinking?! Lesson? Don't bother running from God. He can get to you anywhere. But that's really not even close to what the biblical account has to say to us. There's some crazy stuff going on, I tell you. It's hard to swallow.

◆It's like another crazy thing that happened years ago. I recall that in (1982, my college days) ABC news reported that there was a new piece of modern art revealed: an armchair with a shotgun affixed to it pointing at the occupant of the chair. The "art" was to be viewed by sitting in the chair where one would be looking directly down the barrel. Did I mention that the gun was loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment sometime in the next 100 years? But here's the amazing thing: people were waiting in long lines for a chance to sit and stare into the path of the shotgun shell! They all knew the gun could go off an any second, from which there would be no escape or recovery. Yet they were willing to gamble that the fatal blast wouldn't happen during their minute in the chair. It's on a par with trying to run from God! It's all backwards! What were they thinking?!

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◆ **Jonah's story begins with what's backward.** What's most striking in the opening scene to me is how many backwards elements there are. Let me show you what I mean. If you read the story slowly enough you'll see that all the "wrong" people are doing the right things and the "right" people are doing the wrong things. And from this we learn a healthy lesson about ourselves:

◆ **A. Right people are perfectly capable of doing wrong things.**

Let's say it another way: good people are perfectly capable of doing really bad things. Or, smart people are perfectly capable of doing really dumb things.

◆ 1) Take **Jonah** for example. He's God's prophet! He's not a donkey salesman. He's a prophet. In a theocentric religious nation like Israel, that's a fairly respectable calling! God talked directly to him (v1)! Pause for a moment. Just suppose you heard in no uncertain terms the voice of God out of the sky. This is the Creator (Jonah will point this out to the sailors later.), the Maker with a capital M. It just kinda seems like we wouldn't go and do the exact opposite of what God said, doesn't it? It's nuts. I hear God's power-voice in the clouds say, "Don't take that persons can of Coke, Randy. It's not yours." And I say to myself, "I think I'll take that persons can of Coke while he's not looking." Really? But that's what Jonah does. It's clearer in the hebrew language:

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◆(v1) "Arise...and cry out" against Nineveh because it's evil had come before the "face" of God. But Jonah (v2) "arose and fled" from the "face" of God. And then he did the opposite of arising, he "descended to Joppa", got on a ship headed in the other direction (Tarshish is Spain. Nineveh is Iraq.), and "descended" into it to flee God! There he sleeps like a baby, apparently unperturbed that he is countering GOD himself. Its laughable! The CW channel would love it for it's shock value.

◆2). Take the **sailors** as another example. They're pagans. They don't know the true God. And yet the ship captain repeats to Jonah the exact words that God said to him earlier (v6): "arise and cry out". (Jonah? Are you getting any of this?) The *pagan* ship captain is *asking* Jonah to get God to notice them and save them! But God's prophet doesn't pick up on it. AND he doesn't cry out to God!

◆In verse **13** Jonah knows that he's the problem that brought the storm. But he doesn't suggest they turn the ship around so he can obey God and go to Nineveh. He'd rather die than do what God said to do (He actually says this several times in the book!) He does NOT want to go to Nineveh and warn them that there is a God and he's going to stomp out their evil, because he does NOT want them to be saved. The sailors row

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hard to save Jonah rather than toss him in. But Jonah isn't trying hard to say anybody. Weird, right?

◆By **v14** the pagan sailors are crying out to the one true God themselves for mercy... and they sacrifice to him and worship before him (**v16**). It's just all backwards! Something Jonah did not do.

◆**B.** And so now we arrive at what perhaps is our first application in the Book of Jonah: I need to beware my sinfulness which blinds me to my sins. Sin is living life backwards, not the way we're supposed to live. We read Jonah and can't believe anyone could be so foolish; God's prophet running from his own boss! Doesn't he know...

◆*"There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD." Proverbs 21:30, NIV.*

◆And Jonah was a microcosm of Israel the nation which was complacent about holiness and witness. In Jonah's day (800BC), a century-long war with Damascus over the border lines was won by Jeroboam II. Israel was in a state of gloating and pride. They were wealthy people, living large. Jonah's contemporary, the prophet Amos describes them...

◆*"You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of*

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Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end. The Sovereign LORD has sworn by himself--the LORD God Almighty declares: "I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses; I will deliver up the city and everything in it.""
Amos 6:4-8, NIV.

- ◆ Let's update the language to our culture, shall we? "You have the latest temper-pedic magic foam mattress, and fancy leather wrap-around couches. You dine on pork chops and T-bone steaks. You jam on your guitars and saxophones at the bars, and drink bottle after bottle from creative micro-brewreys. You have wrinkle cream for your eyelids, and moisturizers for you aging skin but... you don't shed a tear for the dying, lost country all around you." Does that help?
- ◆ **C.** Ouch! They were living the rich life and heedless of anybody else's eternity. So now we need to do some self-evaluation. The backward thing about sin is we hardly ever see our own, and when someone else sees it, we tend to defend it. This happens in **churches** just like it happened in Israel. Someone welcomes us into their small group to grow spiritually, and after a while we all know each other, and we like each other. And after a while when it's suggested we invite someone new or multiply, we're not so sure we want to. We like what we have. We don't *want* to go to Nineveh. Again, we churches all tend to worship in our own

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traditional ways, you know, how we've always done it! And some new person comes along suggesting different ways of doing things, maybe new music, cut out this, and add that, –and we suck in our breath. We like it the way we've always liked it.

Here's another example. When we look around the room, we know if so-and-so would just get an attitude adjustment everything would be more pleasant around here, but it's never crossed our mind that maybe other people think that about us!

◆ One of the things Jonah/Israel is teaching us: Be humble. the wise person is a humble person who maintains his own integrity, and keeps a healthy suspicion of her own goodness.

◆ *"Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice." Proverbs 13:10, NIV.*

◆ So the opening questions rising out of the book of Jonah are questions about our own pride. I'm gonna do my thing, my way. I'll hide from God if I have to. (Jonah doesn't even see that he's being a fool!) Funny thing is we all do it to, don't we. Where in your life have you decided that you know better than God does? Are you one who can take advice? I mean really? Are you one who is open to the idea that the guy you were arguing with could have a valid point? In a group, do you have to state your opinion repeatedly after each other opinion is voiced? Do you feel uncomfortable around people of a different race? Do we quote 1Cor.13 all about love, and say we're all about loving our neighbor but we don't even talk to our neighbors. When we hear

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about someone needing some money we say, "well I'll have to pray about this of course..." and hope no one brings it up again. Are we so busy playing that we just have no open time to volunteer? This is what **pride** looks like. Eventually we flat out say, "I'm sorry God, but you must be wrong about this or that." when what we need to realize is what the prophet Jeremiah said:

◆ "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps." Jeremiah 10:23, NIV.

◆ **Conclusion:** A son was prepping to leave for university. Afraid that secular thinking would cause his son to walk away from God and his Word, The father said, "Don't let them take Jonah out of the Bible!" Home on Christmas break, dad asked if Jonah was still in the Bible. "Awe dad, there never was a book of Jonah!" Dad hurried over to the shelf for the family Bible saying "Of course there is!" But when he looked for it it wasn't there because the son had carefully cut the pages out. "What difference is there if I forget the scriptures at college, or you forget them at home?"

◆ It's a little painful to look at the book of Jonah. It's a tragic comedy. So much is out of place it's laughable. As far as we know Jonah never did see how "off" he really was. But maybe this is bothersome to you. You know how they say in every group there's a stinker; someone with a bad habit, or an annoying characteristic that everyone else sees plain as day, but the person does not? And if you don't know who in your group it is, then it's probably you? Well, if any of this concerns your soul, and if down

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deep, unlike Jonah, you want to be awake to yourself, I want to share with you a simple, but ancient exercise. It's called the exam of conscience. It's about becoming awake to what's backward in us (sin). At the end of the day you sit with God for a few moments to review the day. You ask God to bring to mind moments, actions, attitudes where you fell short of the character of Christ. And you wait. When God shows you something there are three steps: 1) see it 2) name it 3) confess it.

◆ *"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Proverbs 28:13, NIV.*

◆ [If you'd like to pursue this deeper come see me and I'll show you some resources.]

◆ **Final note:** Jonah's tragic comedy is also full of hope. Sailors find the true God. God saves Jonah's life anyway. Brutal Assyrian enemies repent (I'll tell you more about them later). All through the story we see the gracious nature of God. He loves. He comes. He warns. He relents. He saves. His greatest expression of this was the coming of his Son Jesus to die for human sins and grant us real and lasting life. Jesus was everything Jonah was supposed to be. By the way, Jesus too slept in a boat in a storm that suddenly came up, but he was *on* God's mission to save lost people. He too calmed the sea but merely by speaking to it himself. And he said this:

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- ◆“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.” Matthew 12:40, 41, NIV.
- ◆God sent Jonah and Israel on mission to show the world his salvation. God sent Jesus on mission to the whole world to bring that salvation. This is a clear reference to Jesus death, burial, and resurrection making him the clear source of life. The clear implication for us it to live a life of repentance! Believe on him today. Ask him for forgiveness and it will be granted. Ask for humility. Ask for freedom from selfish pride. Examine your conscience regularly. Turn to him daily. He has promised rest for your soul. Mt11:28