

THE MAN WHO DID NOT UNDERSTAND GRACE

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Text: Jonah

What would you think if I said that the prophet Jonah was hard-hearted, unloving and maybe even a racist? Would that offend you? It really should not, given the facts.

We have often overlooked the heart of Jonah and often portrayed him as a man of God who was reluctant to follow the call of God on his life, but later a man who changes his mind, is used of God and becomes the hero of the story. But if we really look into the scripture we will see a much different picture. Jonah was not the hero of the story—God was. Jonah was, in reality, the villain.

Given the facts about Jonah's attitude we might wonder why God would even use him for such a mission. After all, there were other prophets that God could have sent to deliver the message. In fact, when Jonah ran from the mission it could have been that he was hoping that God would send someone else to preach to the people that he evidently disliked so much.

There is certainly more to the story than can be gained by a casual reading. But one thing is for sure, Jonah was a man of contradictions.

I. HE WAS A MAN FILLED WITH HATE— PREACHING GOD'S LOVE.

A. Why was he filled with so much hatred?

1. Was it because he despised the Ninevites?

■ “Jonah told God exactly why he was angry. He objected to God's sparing Nineveh. Since nowhere else in Scripture do we have any trace of such hatred of the foreigner—despising him, yes, but not hating him—Jonah's motive could only stem from what Nineveh had meant in Israel's past and what he expected it to be in the future.” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*

2. Was it because he saw himself as being above or better than these people?

■ It was F.B. Meyer, I believe, who once said that when we see a brother or sister in sin, there are two things we do not know: First, we do not know how hard he or she tried not to sin. And second, we do not know the power of the forces that assailed him or her. We also do not know what we would have done in the same circumstances. Stephen Brown, *Christianity Today*, April 5, 1993, p. 17. (A-Z Illustrations.com)

B. Why was he preaching?

Obviously Jonah feared God and realized that he could not escape the mission to Nineveh.

■ Note Jonah's change of mind. *"And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Jonah 2:10-3:3 NIV*

II. HE WAS A MAN SEEKING JUDGMENT— PREACHING GOD'S MERCY.

A. Why did the repentance of the Ninevites bother him?

1. It was genuine.
2. It was extreme.

■ Jonah 3:3-10 *Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city--a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news*

reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.
NIV

B. Why was Jonah opposed to the mercy of God?

■ Jonah 4:1-2 reads, *"But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."* NIV

Jonah was angry. The Ninevites had done nothing to deserve God's mercy. God was only sparing them because He (God) was "gracious and compassionate." Jonah's character is clearly seen. But God's character is also revealed. Even in the O.T. God reveals that He is a God of grace and mercy. God is the true hero of this story.

■ G. W. Knight writes, "When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award—yet receives such a gift anyway—that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God." G.W. Knight, Clip-Art Features for Church Newsletters, p. 53. (A-Z Illustrations.com)

III. HE WAS A FAILURE EVEN IN HIS SUCCESS.

A. He wanted judgment for others—mercy for himself.

Jonah had successfully delivered the message of the Lord to the people of Nineveh and had seen 120,000 people saved from the wrath of God, yet he had failed to learn any lesson about God's love or about himself.

■ Jonah 4:5-11 reads, *“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.*

When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

B. He wanted punishment for others—compassion for himself.

Note the opposing views and concerns of Jonah and that of God. God said, *"You have been concerned about this vine.... Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*

As the book concludes, God is still attempting to get Jonah to see that he (Jonah) values himself and even a plant more than the 120,000 Ninevites. God is also trying to get Jonah to see that there was nothing else that He, as a merciful and loving God, could do but have compassion on the Ninevites since they repented.

CONCLUSION

In his book No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Max Lucado tells the following story to illustrate God's love, grace and concern for those who are lost.

■ Longing to leave her poor Brazilian neighborhood, Christina wanted to see the world. Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove, she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother's heart. Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for streetwalkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture--taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." She did.

Max Lucado, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Multnomah Press, 1986, pp. 158-9.