

At a glance

God did not cast Jonah into the deep. It was Jonah's rebellion, conniving, and disobedience that led to man overboard! This study will emphasize how plans change because of attitude.



I recently saw a t-shirt saying, "I'm having technical problems with my attitude today. Avoidance suggested." If Jonah had worn t-shirts, this one would have fit him perfectly.

We're familiar with the Sunday School version of the story of Jonah. God told him to go to Nineveh as a missionary. He didn't want to go, so he boarded a ship headed in the other direction. The moral of the story is if you don't obey God, you might end up in the belly of a big fish. Thankfully, Jonah said he was sorry, got spit up on dry ground, and finally obeyed. God spared Nineveh, and they all lived happily ever after. Right?

Well...the real Jonah is slightly more complex, and the story doesn't really resolve itself quite so satisfactorily. As an adult, it looks to me like Jonah was stubborn, angry, bitter, depressed, terrified, reluctant to obey, whiny, judgmental, and complaining. At the same time, he makes some of the most beautiful and theologically correct statements in the entire Bible about God's nature.



Saying "No" to God

Jonah 1:1-3

The first problem we encounter in the adult version of Jonah's story is, "Why did Jonah not want to obey? Was he uncertain of God's will? Certainly not! In the second verse of the book, "the word of the Lord came to Jonah." Clear and simple.

Was he too lazy to go? No again. Nineveh was far, but Tarshish was farther and much more expensive.

Was Jonah having a crisis of faith? The answer is again negative. In verse 9 of the first chapter, well before becoming fish bait, Jonah clearly states, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." That sounds like a clear statement of faith to me.

Fortunately, Jonah himself later tells us just why he disobeyed, but we have to look at the end of the book. In Jonah 4:2, we eavesdrop as he tells the Lord, "That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish: for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

Say what? Jonah disobeyed because God is gracious. Yes, that is exactly what he said. Jonah was personally a great fan of God's mercy, love, and patience. He was happy for God to extend His grace to himself, family, country, and friends. However, when God wanted to extend the same compassion and forgiveness to Jonah's enemies, that's where he drew the line!

The truth is Jonah hated Nineveh. Consumed by anger and the thirst for revenge, he did NOT want one of them to get out of the well-deserved judgment of God.

The ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh was located in what is now modern Iraq, near the city of Mosul. It was part of the Assyrian Empire and feared for its acts of terrorism including beheadings, mutilations, rape, and torture. Sounds all too familiar these days, doesn't it?

Jonah had good reason to hate the Assyrians. They did not deserve God's mercy. The atrocities they had committed truly warranted the judgment and justice of God. So, Jonah said, "No way! I will not be involved in telling them about God and helping them get off the hook." He wanted them to get what was coming to them.

We can certainly understand Jonah's attitude and perhaps even justify it in our minds. Though Jonah has long been the poster child for rebellion and disobedience, we have to ask ourselves if our response would have been any different.



Running From God

Jonah 1:3-16

There is nothing easy about forgiving those who have caused us pain. As you read this, you may be thinking of someone who hurt you deeply. Perhaps the trauma is so personal you've never even told anyone. On the other hand, you may catch yourself telling anyone who will listen about how nasty that person was to you.

Holding on to anger and bitterness causes a huge disconnect in the heart of the believer. Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Just three verses later, Jesus says that if you do not forgive men their sins, He will not forgive yours.

Refusal to forgive causes our spirits to become increasingly toxic. It doesn't actually hurt the person who wronged us, but

it sure does a number on our emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Of course, unwillingness to forgive is just one example of sin. Any unconfessed sin or rebellion will poison our spirits if we refuse to repent and allow the Lord to "detox" our hearts.

Most of us have never physically boarded a ship to Tarshish. These days we have other ways to run from God's nagging voice. My personal favorites are neglecting my Bible and turning to TV, shopping, overeating, and oversleeping. If I weren't such a good Christian, I might try drugs, alcohol, clubbing, or partying. The truth is the root—the sin behind the sin—is the same in each case. We want to drown out the convicting voice of God and remain in our sin.

In Jonah 1:5, we see Jonah's anger led him into depression. He is exhibiting symptoms commonly acknowledged by psychologists of our time. He is sleeping excessively, a common method of self-medicating emotional pain. He is apathetic and numb to the crisis around him. When confronted by the other passengers, he seems completely detached when he says, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is

upon you" (Jonah 12:1).

Remember, Jonah didn't know the rest of the story. Being thrown into the tempestuous sea during a storm meant certain death. Jonah could've chosen to repent at this point, since he knew what the problem was. However, he would literally rather have died than forgive his enemies and become an instrument of God's mercy to them.



An Appointment With God

Jonah 1:17-2:10

I doubt Jonah had written it in his pocket planner, but God had made a reservation for a 3-night/3-day all-expenses-paid vacation in "The Belly of the Whale." It was anything but pleasant, and Jonah did not come out tanned and relaxed. He did come out ready to finally obey the Lord. It may have been the most life-changing getaway in recorded history!

Jonah's prayer is full of panic, distress, and repentance. It is also not without a little bit of attitude. Even from inside the whale, Jonah seems to be doing a bit of blame shifting. In verse 3, he says that thou had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas...

all the waves and the billows had passed over him. He seems to have forgotten that it was his doing, not God's, which resulted in his present predicament.

God did not cast Jonah into the deep. Technically, the other passengers did so at Jonah's request. Jonah wouldn't even have been on that ship in the first place if he'd followed God's plan. It was Jonah's rebellion, conniving, and disobedience that led to man overboard!

God was responsible for two things: He sent the storm, and He prepared the fish. God was too concerned for the lost, and for Jonah's stubborn attitude, to allow him smooth sailing. It is not okay to disobey God! We got that part right in the Sunday School stories.

We, too, will find that living in rebellion and willful sin is a sure way to incur God's discipline. He will do what is necessary to recapture our attention. BUT, He also prepared a great fish to save Jonah, even in the midst of his disobedience!

Thankfully, Jonah remembered the Lord. The same God who had compassion on the undeserving people of Nineveh was full of patience for his rebellious prophet. Rather than begrudging God's grace toward the wicked, we should thank Him daily. We

ARE the wicked, and yet He gives us grace, patience, forgiveness, and a way of escape.



Reluctant Obedience

Jonah 3:1-4:11

Every Sunday School kid is happy when Jonah finally obeys and the people of Nineveh aren't destroyed. Jonah? He wasn't happy at all. "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (4:1). He delivered the message from God, but then found himself a good seat outside the city and waited eagerly to see it destroyed. His heart toward his enemies remained unchanged.

Obviously, God's desire is for us to follow Him joyfully, with a heart eager to do His will. He wants us to want to obey Him. Let's get real. We all have times when we don't want to obey—when we'd rather not go to church, be unselfish, or say "no" to that tempting "no-no." Since we can't really obey willingly, should we just give in to our desires? Our reluctant obedience won't please God anyway, right?

We should do some simple things when we don't want to obey. First, we should examine our hearts and ask God to

change our "want-to." If we're in the very moment of temptation, a quick prayer can change the outcome of our struggle. If there's more time, it is helpful to refer to the Bible and remind us of the truths that should guide our decisions.

Next, we should obey, even if we don't want to. I'm all about being honest and real, but let's face it—it's better to think about sinning than to sin. It's better to do the right thing than the wrong one. Even with less than ideal motives, the rule of consequences is in play, and it is always better to choose the right action. No matter how reluctant he felt in his heart, Jonah did the right thing, and because of his decision, an entire city was spared God's judgment.

The shocking thing about the book of Jonah is the story ends with the main character retaining his bad attitude. After all the Lord did to spare him, Jonah still had the nerve to question His judgment. Can you imagine the prideful attitude of saying to God, "I know better than you about this...you should have zapped those people." It's a wonder God didn't zap Jonah!

But that, my friends, is our happy ending! In Jonah's own words: "I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful,

slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:2). I am so thankful the Bible is full of imperfect followers and God's patience and mercy is available, not just to them, but to me as well!

About the Writer: Ruth, with her husband Donnie, has served as a missionary in Japan for over 30 years. Currently, they live in Tokyo, leading the Good News FWB Church and seeking to develop Japanese leadership. They have four children and two grandchildren.
