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THE FAILURE OF SUCCESS: The Story Of Jonah

Much has been published about the principles of success. Success and failure, however, may be defined in different ways by different people. Is there an absolute standard for success and failure? Do we win or do we lose when our accomplishments cost more than we can afford?

In the following pages, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, brings these issues into focus by examining the life of the Old Testament prophet Jonah—one man who personally modeled and experienced “the failure of success.”

Martin R. De Haan II

A “SUCCESSFUL” FAILURE

The movie *Apollo 13* tells the story of the real-life experience of Jim Lovell and his NASA space crew. The purpose of their mission was to land on and explore the moon, but a life-threatening in-flight explosion crippled the spacecraft. Suddenly, the goal changed. Mission Control in Houston spent the next several days trying to direct the repair of the dying spacecraft and save the lives of the three astronauts on board. In the end, the mission was seen as a success because the crew returned safely. Yet it was also a failure because *Apollo 13* never achieved the original goal of landing on the moon. It was a “successful” failure.

The same could be said of the prophet Jonah. The book that

bears his name shows that in spite of Jonah’s many personal failures, God successfully directed an amazing rescue.

Ironically, the prophecy of Jonah is often seen as a part of the Old Testament that reflects the heart of God for the nations of the world. But Jonah, the man, doesn’t deserve the credit. From beginning to end, he was a reluctant participant in God’s mission of mercy.

The bigger picture is that Jonah’s failure to care about the people of Nineveh reflected the attitude of his countrymen as well. Together, he and the whole nation of Israel seemed oblivious to the fact that something had gone terribly wrong with the Ninevites and that their lives were hanging in the balance. The fact that these people who were about to die were Israel’s worst enemies is all part of this amazing story.

Introducing The Prophet Jonah.

Jonah 1:1 starts out: “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai.” Jonah (which means “dove” in Hebrew) is identified as the son of Amittai (which means “truthful”). According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was from Gath Hepher, a village about 2 miles northeast of Nazareth. Second Kings 14 also helps us to date Jonah’s life sometime during Jeroboam’s reign from 793–753 BC. Some believe that Jonah began to speak on behalf of God about the time the prophet Elisha was concluding his work.

Understanding The Book Of Jonah.

Two keys will prove useful in understanding the real issues in this book.

Key #1: The book records Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, but it is written to *Israel*, who hated Nineveh.

Because God uses Jonah to confront the hatred of Israel, the prophecy of Jonah is as much about racism as it is about missions.

Key #2: Jonah is *not* the principal character of his own book—*God is!* God has the first word and the last. He orchestrates the entire drama to show His love for Israel’s enemies. As amazing events unfold, we must not get caught up in the props and staging. The Lord Jehovah, not Jonah, is the central character of this story.

*Jonah is not the
principal character
of his own book—
God is!*

It is this focus that can open our understanding to the real message of Jonah—“The Failure Of Success.”

SUCCESSING AT FAILURE

In the 1960s, the Beatles recorded the old country song, “Act Naturally.” The title reminds us that there are some things that we don’t have to learn how to do—they just come to us naturally.

This is true when we think of our inclination to run from God. It has been said that all of us must learn to obey, but no one needs to be taught to disobey. Playing the role of spiritual fugitive is a natural instinct of fallen human beings.

JONAH’S CONCERN FOR HIMSELF AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS (JONAH 1:1-16)

As we are introduced to Jonah, we see him “act naturally”—he shows more shortsighted concern for himself than he does for

God or others. When the God of Israel asks Jonah to carry a message of warning to another nation, the reluctant prophet runs in the opposite direction. Let’s take a closer look at what was happening in Jonah’s heart—and in God’s.

The Desire Of God (1:1-2)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah . . . , saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city” (1:1-2a).

Nineveh, founded by Nimrod, was on the east bank of the Tigris River, about 550 miles from Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. (It would take Jonah about a month to walk there at 15-20 miles a day.) It was large, and was protected by an outer wall and an inner wall. The inner wall was 50 feet wide and 100 feet high. This was the time of Nineveh’s greatest glory.

Cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me (1:2b).

Notice carefully that this is a message of judgment, not mercy. God was going to judge the people of Nineveh for their wickedness. He is “Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25). And He must be recognized as such because, even though He is Savior, He is also Sovereign.

God as Judge sent a messenger with a message of judgment, but Jonah declined. Instead of accepting his assignment to speak on behalf of God, the prophet decided to make a run for it.

The Desertion Of Jonah (1:3)

Where Did Jonah Flee?

But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord (1:3a).

Jonah’s response to God’s

mission was the opposite of Isaiah’s, who said to the Lord, “Here am I! Send me.” (Isa. 6:8). Jonah was told to arise and go, and he did—but in the opposite direction! He headed for Tarshish, which was 2,500 miles west of Joppa on the west coast of Spain. And Jonah thought he was going to be able to “flee . . . from the presence of the Lord,” which was impossible.

Psalm 139 makes it clear that it is impossible to escape the presence of the Lord. Still, Jonah attempted what Adam and Cain had tried before him—running from God’s presence. And he did this rather than obey the Lord’s command.

Why Did Jonah Flee?

He understood God’s judgment, but he also understood God’s mercy. And, as we will see, Jonah did not want Nineveh, the capital of an enemy nation, to be forgiven. Because Jonah knew the willingness

of God to forgive sin when there is true change of heart, he fled rather than tell the Ninevites of the coming judgment. He didn't want them to escape God's wrath.

Over the years, some have tried to excuse Jonah's response. Some say the difficulties of the assignment dissuaded him because it would take a month of hard travel to get there, and 3 days' journey just to get from one side of the city to the other (3:3).

Others say that Jonah thought the task was too dangerous. The evil of Nineveh was legendary in ancient times, and it was often experienced firsthand by the Jewish people (see Nah. 3:1-5).

Still, at the root of Jonah's unwillingness to go to the citizens of Nineveh was a great hatred for them. They had proven themselves again and again to be the enemies of Israel. They

were seen as cruel torturers who descended on rival nations like a plague of locusts—destroying and consuming all.

For Jonah to go to Nineveh would have been the moral equivalent of asking a Jewish resident of New York City in the 1940s to go to Berlin and give the Nazis a chance to be forgiven. The racial tension was so intense that, rather than obey, Jonah fled.

This prodigal prophet would learn the cost of hatred, and learn it the hard way. Frank Gaebelin wrote:

In a day when prejudice and hate inflame men's emotions and pervert their judgment, Jonah speaks with compelling force about limiting our love and sympathies only to some of our fellow human beings and excluding others from our pity and compassion (*Four Minor Prophets*, p.25).

It is easier to hate than to love—and some of us may often find ourselves dangerously close to creating our own Nineveh.

It is easier to hate than to love—and some of us may often find ourselves dangerously close to creating our own Nineveh.

Perhaps the people that inhabit our “Nineveh” are abortionists, homosexuals, political enemies, cultists, or an ethnic group we are uncomfortable with. The question we must honestly consider is this: Will our prejudice cause us, like Jonah, to be guilty of silence, or will we intentionally express

the heart of our God?

Jonah chose silence and hate rather than obedience and love.

How Did Jonah Flee?

[Jonah] went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it (1:3b).

A boat sailed from Joppa to Tarshish only a few times a year. There was room for him on the ship, so he paid the fare, got on board, and headed west.

At this point, Jonah might have felt affirmed in his actions. Everything was working out, the pieces were falling into place, the circumstances of life were confirming his plan—but the sad reality is that he was still more concerned about himself than others. How easy it is to justify our actions, especially when the wind is at our back. But circumstances, like the wind, can quickly change.

The Desperation Of The Sailors (1:4-9)

God's Reaction (v.4).

But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

The phrase “but the Lord” is in direct contrast to “but Jonah” in the preceding verse. The Lord who called Jonah now pursued His wayward servant.

The text says that God “sent out,” which in the Hebrew is a graphic word for “threw down or flung” (the same expression used in 1 Samuel 18:11 of Saul throwing his javelin at David). It is a term that describes the wind striking the sea with such great force that it rocked the ship.

The result of God's action was “a mighty tempest on the sea.” This phrase brings to mind a contrast. In Mark 4, when Jesus was on the

stormy Sea of Galilee, He *calmed* the storm. But here He *caused* it! And it's interesting to note that God's human servants (Jonah in this case) may disobey Him, but His servants in nature (the wind and the sea) always obey Him.

The Sailors' Response (v.5a).

Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load.

Jonah's disobedience caused problems not only for himself but also for those around him. The sailors were innocent bystanders (like the family of Achan in Joshua 7). They were simple, hardworking men who were caught in the middle of Jonah's battle with God.

What was their response? It was threefold:

First, they had an *emotional response*—they

“were afraid.” This is notable because these veteran sailors were experienced on the Mediterranean Sea. They knew the nature of the storms there, and they knew that this was no ordinary storm.

Second, they had a *spiritual response*—“every man cried out to his god.” You may criticize these sailors for their “foxhole prayers,” but everyone on board was praying—except Jonah! Although he was supposed to be a man of God, Jonah was, practically speaking, acting like the only atheist on board.

Third, they had a *practical response*—they “threw the cargo . . . into the sea, to lighten the load.” They viewed death as being so imminent that their desire for survival outweighed their need for income.

Jonah’s Repose (v.5b).

But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the

ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

In the midst of the storm, while this flurry of activity was taking place on deck, Jonah was fast asleep! How was this possible? He seemed to be at peace. But we know he was at odds with God. Sometimes we claim that a sense of peace is a good way to measure whether a certain decision is the right one. But maybe this spiritual barometer is really a self-delusion and not the peace of God at all. Commentator Merrill Unger wrote:

In his backslidden condition [Jonah] lay “fast asleep,” the result not of submission to God and trust in Him, as in the case of our Lord’s sleep on Galilee’s stormy lake (Mk. 4:37-39), but of spiritual numbness produced by a dull conscience.

The Sailors’ Remedy (vv.6-9).

So the captain came

to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish” (v.6).

In desperation, the shipmaster woke Jonah and pleaded with him to pray. How ironic that the pagan had to call the man of God to prayer!

After trying everything else, the sailors were left with only one possible answer—the storm was the anger of the gods against someone on board. Notice what they tried to do to remedy the desperate situation they were in:

They said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah (v.7).

In ancient times, people sometimes used colored stones to help discern “the

will of the gods.” In this case it worked and the lot fell on Jonah. The same God who controlled the storm also controlled the lot that was cast (Prov. 16:33).

Then they said to [Jonah], “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” (v.8).

With machine-gun speed they began to probe Jonah with a series of questions that basically consisted of: Who are you and why is this happening? Jonah replied:

I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (v.9).

Well, that wasn't entirely true, was it? If Jonah really feared God, he would have been traveling east to Nineveh, not west to Tarshish.

I believe that when Jonah

identified his God as the One who “made the sea,” he was indicating that his God was the One personally responsible for their predicament—and that He was the only solution for it.

The Determination Of Jonah (vv.10-14)

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?”—for the sea was growing more tempestuous (vv.10-11).

Verse 10 says that after the sailors learned about Jonah running from God, they were “exceedingly afraid.” Why? Initially they feared only the storm; now they feared the God behind the storm.

The essence of fearing God is to recognize His authority, to respect His authority, and to respond to His authority. The sailors did this, but Jonah didn't! Someone once said that unbelievers never look better than when they are compared to disobedient children of God. Since Jonah wouldn't repent, the sailors asked how they could appease this storm-producing God.

[Jonah] said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me” (v.12).

In essence, Jonah was saying, “I would rather die than obey God and preach repentance to people I hate.”

How tragic. Jonah could have said, “I repent and you should too!” or “Turn around and get me to Nineveh,” or at the very

least, “Give me an oar and let me help row.” Instead he seemed to be saying to God, “I would rather die than go with You to Nineveh.”

In contrast to Jonah’s unwillingness to be involved in sparing the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Nineveh, notice how hard these heathen sailors worked to save one man’s life. And also notice the respect they had for the Lord in contrast to the disrespect that Jonah was showing:

The men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You” (vv.13-14).

The Dramatic Ending Of The Storm (vv.15-16)

So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.

When the stormy sea suddenly fell calm, the storm in the sailors’ hearts grew stronger—now they *really* feared God! Not only had He caused the storm, He was able to turn it off when it suited His purposes.

They offered sacrifices of worship to the true God and made vows of commitment to Him. Meanwhile, Jonah sank like a rock—thinking that he had achieved his goal. He was convinced that he had successfully escaped from the presence of the Lord. But had he?

GOD'S RESPONSE TO DISOBEDIENCE (JONAH 1:17–2:10)

We now launch into the passage that makes Jonah one of the most attacked books in the Bible. In the 1930s murder trial of Leopold and Loeb, their attorney Clarence Darrow attacked the credibility of a key witness by saying, “You could more easily believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale.” His strategy backfired, however, because much of the jury said they *did* believe the story of Jonah and the fish. So Darrow’s clients were found guilty.

God’s Preparation (1:17)

The Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

This is the statement in the story of Jonah that is often ridiculed—but it also

calls for our faith in a supernatural God who is unlimited by the natural realm. Let’s look at verse 17 more closely.

The Hebrew word for *prepared* includes the idea of creative activity, implying that this particular fish was especially created by God for this specific event.

The text says that God made “a great fish,” not a whale as many believe, though certain whales could swallow a man. (A fully grown adult sperm whale has a mouth 20 feet long, 15 feet high, 9 feet wide and can eat an entire squid whole.) The text indicates, however, that it was a specially prepared “great fish.”

And Jonah wasn’t just swallowed by the fish, he remained in its belly for 3 days and 3 nights. This is important, because in Matthew 12:40 Jesus not only acknowledged the

historical fact of Jonah being in the fish, but He went beyond that and showed its prophetic significance. He said, “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jonah’s Prayer (2:1-9)

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish’s belly (v.1).

Jonah did something in the fish’s belly that he refused to do when he was in the boat—he cried out to God. Caves, crosses, and stoning pits may be unusual places from which to pray, but nothing tops this! Imagine what it would have been like to experience the swallowing itself. And what about the conditions within this living grave! But it was there that Jonah lifted up his voice to pray. His prayer has several parts:

His Prayer Of Repentance (v.2).

I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.

Jonah prayed because of his “affliction” (lit. “binding up”), which is appropriate for a man in a fish. Notice

Jonah did something in the fish’s belly that he refused to do when he was in the boat—he cried out to God.

that the place of his prayer is “out of the belly of Sheol,” not just the belly of the fish.

What is Sheol? It is pictured in Scripture as being beneath the ground (Job 17:16), a place of darkness (Job 10:19-22), and a place of silence (Ps. 6:5).

Although being in Sheol implies separation from God, it is accessible to God. In most cases, Sheol is the realm of the dead. Whether used to speak of the grave or of the realm of existence after death, it is clear that Sheol is a place of death, not life.

Jonah had set out for Tarshish in defiance of God, but he ended up in Sheol. Yet in spite of his rebellion, when Jonah repented, God responded. Jonah said to God, "You heard my voice."

His Prayer Of Submission (vv.3-4).

You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, "I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple."

Here Jonah came to his senses. Finally, in the belly of a great fish, he saw the sovereignty of God in spite of

his physical circumstances. In the grip of death, he saw God's hand behind all that had happened to him ("You cast me," "Your billows," "Your waves," "Your sight"). God was the one who caused the storm to erupt and He was the one who used the sailors to execute His judgment by casting Jonah into the sea.

Evidence of God's powerful presence in life's circumstances can be seen throughout Scripture. Paul, for example, saw himself as a prisoner of Christ (not Rome). Joseph saw God's hand behind his slavery. Job saw the work of God in his trials. And the Son of God recognized the Father's hand in His suffering.

Besides acknowledging God's power and authority in his circumstances, Jonah also appealed to God's mercy. With hope of being restored to worship, he prayed in verse 4, "I will

look again toward Your holy temple.”

His Prayer In Trouble
(vv.5-6).

The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God.

These verses describe the terrifying depths to which Jonah had sunk. His flight from God, a violent storm, deep water, and the hungry mouth of a monster fish brought him to the threshold of Sheol, the land of the dead (“the earth with its bars closed behind me forever”).

Yet, even though Jonah believed that death had claimed him, this part of his prayer ended with hope when he said, “You have

brought up my life from the pit.” He acknowledged God’s loving correction as necessary for his restoration, not his destruction.

His Prayer Of Restoration
(v.7).

When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple.

As Jonah was beginning to fade, he prayed for restoration.

His Prayer Of Confession
(v.8).

Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy.

The NIV translates this verse: “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.” Jonah was confessing his sin of trusting in an idol that could do nothing to save or rescue him, which was a complete waste of time and energy. And what was Jonah’s idol? It was his self-

will—the ultimate idol.

Bowing at the idol of his own will, Jonah had committed himself to a path of rebellion—the ultimate spiritual failure. Only when he turned to God in repentance would he discover what spiritual success was truly all about.

His Prayer Of Thanksgiving (v.9).

But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed.

Salvation is of the Lord.

This prayer meant two things. He was ready to stop worshiping himself at the altar of his own will. And he was ready to make the turn. Like a broken fugitive with nowhere to hide, he gave himself up. So he declared, “I will sacrifice” and “I will pay what I have vowed.” With these words he declared his long-overdue surrender and said, in effect, “Lord, take me to Nineveh!”

God’s Power (2:10)

So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Again we see the control of God. The winds obeyed. The seas obeyed. Now the fish obeys. The only one who disobeyed was Jonah, the man of God. The sailors couldn’t get Jonah to shore, but God used the fish to get him there rather easily.

Jonah’s return to dry land was unceremonial and unconventional. The fish vomited him up. This is not a pleasant thought, but it is the only “positive” use of the word *vomit* in the Bible. Elsewhere *vomit* is used of Israel (Lev. 18), the rich (Job 20), Laodicea (Rev. 3), a dog and a fool (Prov. 26:11), and mostly of drunks.

Jonah’s story began with him “succeeding at failure” as he rejected God’s call, disobeyed God’s command, and ignored God’s will. He worshiped

at the idol of self,
choosing to die rather
than submit to God.
But in grace and in
correction, God pursued
His wayward servant. Now
Jonah, who succeeded so
well at spiritual failure, will
be given a second chance,
another opportunity to get
it right.

FAILING AT SUCCESS

In 1836, a war was waged
for the independence of
Texas. The leader of
Mexico, Santa Anna, was
not about to give in to the
“Texicans” who were ready
to die for their freedom. In
March of that year, Santa
Anna’s soldiers pressed their
siege of San Antonio de
Bejar for 13 crucial days.
Although they eventually
succeeded in storming the
Alamo and overwhelming
the badly outnumbered

Texans, Santa Anna paid
a huge price for his victory.
While Mexican forces
were tied up in the battle
for the Alamo, General Sam
Houston used the time to
organize an army that would
defeat Mexico at San Jacinto
and allow Texas to become
a republic. Santa Anna won
the battle—but he lost the
war.

WINNING THE BATTLE (JONAH 3:1-10)

As we come to the third
chapter of Jonah, the Lord
of Israel has won the battle.
But as we will see, the war
is not yet over.

Back on land, Jonah
begins to make his way to
Nineveh. He had taken a
detour through the belly
of a fish, but now he’s back
on track. In the last two
chapters, God will use him
to bring about one of the
greatest rescues in history.
But how will Jonah respond?

A Second Chance (3:1-2)

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

Against the backdrop of Jonah's resistance and subsequent remorse, God, in grace and mercy, gave Jonah a second chance to carry out his mission.

Notice that Jonah's second call was much more personal and intense than the first. The first call was general ("cry out against"), but the second call was more specific ("preach . . . the message that I tell you").

A second chance for service is not unheard of. It was given to Moses (Acts 7:25) and also to Peter (Jn. 21). But we must not presume. The Scriptures show that it can be dangerous to presume we'll be given a second

chance (1 Ki. 13:26). A "second call" is never guaranteed. It is much safer to respond favorably to God the first time. In Jonah's case, God could have called a second man, but for His own purposes He chose to call the same man a second time.

A Simple Message (3:3-4)

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Nineveh was great in size, significance, and wealth. But it was also great in its sin (1:2). That is why Jonah was there, and he began the 3-day journey through town

to declare God's warning to the people.

How did he get a crowd? Bible commentator Harry Rimmer suggests that the fish's gastric juices may have had a dramatic effect on Jonah's appearance by removing his hair and bleaching his skin. The sight of him (and possibly the smell) certainly would have caused people to notice.

God's Judgment.

"Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The word *overthrown* means "to overturn," and the tense of the verb describes it being done with thoroughness—a complete destruction of the city to its foundation. This same word is used in Genesis 19:25 to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Undoubtedly, Jonah preached more than these specific words, but this was his main theme. As warnings go, his message was short

and to the point. Messages of judgment are often marked by such directness:

- Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:7).
- A message of judgment on King Belshazzar supernaturally appeared on a wall with the following message: "Mene, mene, tekem, upharsin" (Dan. 5:25).
- The Lord said to the Ephesian church, "Repent and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5).

It's possible that Jonah might have enjoyed his message of judgment a bit too much. He had already shown his hatred for the Ninevites, and now he was pronouncing their coming destruction. He could have easily felt a sense of satisfaction as he preached those words. But if he did find such pleasure, he missed the mercy of God in the message and urgent warning he proclaimed.

God's Mercy. "Yet forty days . . ." This is the key, for it speaks of God's mercy. If there had been no opportunity for repentance, no deadline would have been needed. But God gave Nineveh a specific amount of time to repent. And what would bring about their repentance? As always, it was the word of God given to people who needed His mercy and forgiveness more than anything else in life.

The irony of Jonah's story, however, is that the people of Nineveh were about to honor God with a surrender that Jonah was still not ready to give. Behind and underneath his external obedience, his internal rebellion remained. He had actively rebelled when he fled to Tarshish, but now he was passively rebelling against the heart of God. As we are about to see, even though he was speaking the words of God,

he remained out of step with the heart of the merciful God who is "not willing that any should perish but that all [even Nineveh] should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

A Serious Response (3:5-9)

What would it have been like to be in Nineveh when Jonah delivered his message? Pastor and author James Montgomery Boice described it like this:

We can almost see Jonah as he entered a day's journey and began to cry out his message. What would be his reception? Would the Ninevites laugh? Would they turn against Jonah and persecute him? As he cried out people stopped to listen. The hum of commerce died down and a holy hush stole over the collecting multitudes. Soon there were weeping

and other signs of genuine repentance of sin. At last the message of Jonah entered even the palace, and the king, divesting himself of his magnificent robes, took the place of a mourner alongside his repenting subjects (*Can You Run Away From God?*, Victor, 1977, pp.71-72).

What an amazing scene! Notice how an entire culture responded to the grace and mercy of God:

Their Belief (v.5a).

So the people of Nineveh believed God

The word *believed* here is identical to the word in Genesis 15:6. “[Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” This isn’t just believing what is said; it is trusting the God who has spoken. The people believed that Jonah’s message was from God, and they took it seriously. Hebrews 11:6 says that “without faith it is

impossible to please God.” They believed God—and responded!

Their Repentance And Prayer (vv.5-9).

So the people of Nineveh . . . proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if

God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?”

Two Old Testament expressions of a sincere change of heart are fasting and wearing sackcloth. Notice that their faith produced action—spontaneous, immediate, and unanimous.

Putting on sackcloth (coarse cloth) was a symbol of humiliation, distress, and mourning. It was a declaration of personal unworthiness, and it was done by *all* the people, from the greatest to the least. Even the animals were involved.

The people's repentant faith caused a change in their behavior. No vague or superficial confession would do. A true change of minds and hearts evidenced by changed lives was desperately needed.

In response to Jonah's warning from God, a pagan

king led his people in national repentance, acknowledging that God is sovereign and could “turn away from His fierce anger” (v.9) if He chose to. But he still called on the citizens of Nineveh to pray for God's mercy. His request expressed faith and hope on the part of the king. It is important to notice that neither the king nor the people of Nineveh had any evidence on which to base their hope except that God had given them a warning instead of immediately destroying them. So, by faith, they went to prayer with hope that mercy would overtake judgment.

A Saving God (3:10)

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

What God Saw. He saw their works and that they genuinely turned from their sin. The genuineness of their repentance was seen in the evidence of their changed lives (see Lk. 3:8; Acts 26:20).

What God Did. “God relented . . . and He did not do it.” God reversed His declaration of judgment and rescued them from their sin and guilt. This doesn’t mean, however, that God repented or changed His mind. Instead, He remained true to His eternal principles of justice and mercy. Consider the following:

- *The Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man, that He should change His mind (1 Sam. 15:29 NIV).*
- *God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will*

He not make it good? (Num. 23:19).

The point is that the character of God does not change. Instead, as people change in their relationship to Him, different laws come into operation. When verse 10 says that “God relented,” it’s not referring to His remorse over an error in judgment, but a removal of judgment as an act of mercy to one who has repented.

***God’s laws
about judgment
of sin are clear.***

God’s laws about judgment of sin are clear, but escape is available when we appeal to Him on His terms seeking mercy and forgiveness. That is how the battle for the hearts of Nineveh had been won.

LOSING THE WAR (JONAH 4:1-11)

From our point of view, the story of Jonah could have ended with chapter 3. The job had been done, Nineveh had repented, and all was well with the world. But chapter 4 is there for a reason. As we come to the final chapter of Jonah's record, we see him failing at success. After being God's instrument to produce the greatest revival in human history, Jonah was more than upset—he was seething with an anger that wouldn't go away.

It's fascinating to see how quickly Nineveh responded to the work of God, yet how slow Jonah was to respond to the Lord. The abundant mercy that God had on the Ninevites created an overwhelming depth of anger and bitterness in the reluctant prophet.

Jonah's Anger (4:1-3)

"It displeased Jonah exceedingly" The word *displeased* means "to see as evil." Jonah actually viewed God's rescue of Nineveh as *wrong!*

". . . and he became angry." The word for *anger* means "to burn." God had mercifully turned from His anger, but Jonah's anger toward God was kindled.

Why was he angry? Because judgment had been averted, and it was a judgment Jonah desperately wanted to see happen! Jonah had done what God wanted him to do—to go and preach—but God had not done what Jonah wanted—to destroy Nineveh. Jonah was angry at God for showing mercy, and he felt betrayed that He had spared the hated Ninevites.

"He prayed . . . and said" The last time Jonah prayed, he was in the belly of a fish and glad for

mercy. But now he was angry at God for that same mercy. Why? Because it had gone to his enemies.

“ . . . **was not this what I said . . . ?**” He basically said to God, “I told you so! I was right, and You were wrong.” He even tried to justify his rebellion by admitting that his initial act of disobedience was an attempt to interfere with or thwart the mercy of God.

In effect, Jonah was saying, “This is the reason I refused to go to Nineveh when You first called me. And I was right for doing so!” Isn’t that what we sometimes do? Boice wrote:

Things do not turn out as we wish, so we seek to justify our disobedience before God. What we need to learn is that we are not sufficient to pass on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the outcome, nor are we

responsible for it. We are responsible only for performing the whole will of God (ibid., pp.84-85).

“ . . . **I know that You are**” Amazingly, Jonah based his argument on the list of divine attributes found in Exodus 34:6-7, God’s revelation of Himself following the sin of Israel with the golden calf at Sinai. Jonah resented the fact that God is:

- “*Gracious*”—showing favor to those who don’t deserve it (like Jonah, who accepted it in 2:9).
- “*Merciful*”—showing kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to those in need. Jonah had received it, but he refused to extend it.
- “*Slow to anger*”—God does not always immediately execute the punishment deserved but gives time to repent.
- “*Abundant in lovingkindness*”—

abounding in love,
goodness, and pity.

- “*One who relents from doing harm*”—capable of judgment as well as forgiveness.

Jonah used God’s own description of Himself in Exodus 34 to accuse Him of being two-faced and inconsistent. Jonah basically said, “I know what You’re like. So why did You send me with a message of judgment if You were just going to show them mercy anyway?”

Jonah was so bitter and angry at God that he just wanted to die.

“ . . . **take my life from me**” It’s amazing that earlier Jonah praised God three times for saving his life (2:5-7). But here, in the first of two times (see also v.8), he asked God to kill him. Why? Jonah refused to accept God’s will because of his own hatred for the Ninevites. His own self-will gripped his thinking so

powerfully (using the words *I, me, and my* eight times in these two verses) that Jonah would rather die than have them live. What a contrast to the Savior, who gladly died so we could live.

God’s Challenge (4:4)

Then the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

God would not leave this matter unresolved, so He challenged Jonah about his anger. It’s not uncommon in the Bible for God to challenge His people with penetrating questions:

- He asked Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9).
- He asked Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen. 4:9).
- Jesus asked Judas, “Are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Lk. 22:48).

It’s as if God were saying to Jonah, “We are looking at the identical situation in two different ways. Which of us

has the proper perspective?” Jonah’s answer should have been, “Let God be true but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). But instead, he ran away again.

Jonah’s Flight (4:5)

So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.

Jonah was concerned only for his comfort—making a shelter where he could sit and watch the city. His festering selfishness had made him into an isolated and bitter man—and without a change of heart a bitter person only gets worse with time.

God would deal with His wayward prophet by asking him another question. But first He would take steps to prepare Jonah’s heart for the message in that question.

God’s Preparation (4:6-8)

The Lord God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant (v.6).

The plant was a rapidly growing plant with broad leaves. Some have identified it as the castor oil plant which grows about 12 feet high and has large leaves. Notice that for the first time in the entire story, Jonah is “grateful.” But it is only because he is benefiting from the plant.

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered (v.7).

The worm had a voracious appetite (“chewed the vine” NIV). Verses 6 and 7 expose two opposite characteristics of God’s nature—His ability to deliver

and to destroy. The purpose of the worm was to destroy the plant so that Jonah would once again be exposed.

It happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind (v.8a).

The wind was a hot, scorching east wind (often called “sirocco”) that blew off the Arabian desert. God responded to the heat of Jonah’s anger by exposing him to the heat of the desert and all its elements.

. . . and the sun beat on Jonah’s head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live” (v.8b).

God supernaturally removed all of Jonah’s avenues of retreat so that He would have Jonah’s undivided attention. But tragically, Jonah still saw death as preferable to submitting to God.

God’s Question (4:9a)

*God said to Jonah,
“Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”*

In verse 4, Jonah was angry about God. Now he’s angry about a plant. Bitterness often begins lofty and ends puny. Boice wrote:

The same thing happens when we become angry. We begin by being angry at big things, but very quickly we become angry at petty things. First we are angry at God. Next we express our anger at circumstances, then minor circumstances. Finally, our shoelace breaks one morning, and we find ourselves swearing. God was showing him this, saying in effect, “Look where your anger has taken you, Jonah. Is this right? Is this the way to live? Do you want to spend the rest of your life swearing at petty annoyances?” (ibid., p.95).

Jonah's Animosity (4:9b)

[Jonah] said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

Jonah still didn't get it. There he sat, under a withered stalk, despondent, bitter, vindictive—a tragic portrait in self-pity. He was still defending himself and despairing of life. He saw no rationale for God's actions with Nineveh or with the plant, so he decided that if God was going to act this way, he would be better off dead.

God's Rebuke (4:10-11)

Compassion For A Plant? (v.10).

But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night."

God put Jonah's attitude into perspective:

- He loved a worthless plant, but hated the eternal souls of men.
- He showed compassion for one small element of God's creation but had no mercy for an entire city facing eternal judgment.

It is as if God were saying, "Jonah, who is it that has no logical rationale for his actions? You or Me?"

Compassion For A City! (v.11).

Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?

Jonah needed to see that compassion for a plant was without value, but compassion for a city with more than 120,000 small children has eternal value. If they couldn't discern right from left, how could they

know right from wrong? If Jonah could not pity the people of the city, surely he could pity the children and the cattle—who at least should be seen as innocent as the plant!

In the midst of this great spiritual awakening, Jonah was still missing the greatness of God's grace and mercy. Having won the battle of reaching Nineveh with God's message, Jonah had lost the war in his own heart.

THE REST OF THE STORY

What happened next? It may be that Jonah finally came to understand the need for mercy to overwhelm judgment. If this weren't true, why else would he write about his own experience and finish it with God's words about the value He places on eternal souls?

In the month or so it would have taken Jonah to travel back to Gath Hopher, God's rebuke probably weighed heavily on his heart. The subsequent conviction could have become so strong that by the time he returned home, he had a heart of love and compassion for the lost—even for those who were his enemies.

When our enemies come to faith in God, they're not our enemies anymore.

Maybe Jonah even realized that when our enemies come to faith in God, they're not our enemies anymore. Aren't you thankful that Jonah

wrote his story with frankness and honesty so that we could be reminded why love is always better than hate?

FAILURE VERSUS SUCCESS

We learn many lessons in the book of Jonah, but the thread that connects them all together is the mercy of God. We see it in His pursuit and restoration of Jonah, His sparing of the sailors, and His miraculous salvation of Nineveh. Also in full view is the spiritual failure of Jonah . . .

- who experienced mercy but gave none;
- who received love but returned none;
- who benefited from the patience of God but resented God for showing that same patience to Nineveh.

It's easy to forget that the

one who is forgiven much should love much, and the one who has received mercy should be merciful.

There's an old hymn that says, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." But even that's not wide enough. The ultimate expression of the wideness of God's mercy is that of the outstretched arms of Christ nailed to a cross and dying for our sins.

How each of us responds to that mercy is the issue on which our eternity hangs. Jonah was "successful" in running from God's mercy, but his greatest failure was in not wanting others to be allowed to experience that mercy. God grant that we would succeed in gratefully and obediently taking His mercy to those who need it as much as we do.

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