

### **Jonah—The Prophet Who Wasn't, Who Preached the Best Sermon Ever**



We all have heard the story of Jonah and the Big Fish. Our Sunday School teachers showed us pictures, then and asked us how Jonah could be in the stomach of the fish for 3 days. This morning, I want to tell you the whole story of Jonah, and help you understand why it is rightfully in the Bible.

The first thing we need to know is that Jewish society before Jesus looked down at Gentiles as impure and ungodly. In fact, most Jews of that day would have said “gentiles are fuel for the fires of hell.” It was felt that Jews should have nothing to do with gentiles, and that they were beyond redemption.

At least one person thought this was wrong and set out to show how wrong this attitude was—by writing a story, a fictional story true, about a prophet who refused God’s request—and yet when he obeyed, continued to hope that God would destroy the gentiles. When the Jews heard the story, they would get the moral point—and enough did to put the story into the Bible to teach generations to come.

Here’s the story of Jonah, in short:

God told Jonah, a prophet, to go to a pagan city, Nineveh, and tell them that they would be destroyed in 40 days unless they repented. But Jonah, not wanting gentiles to even have a chance of repenting, refused to obey God. Instead, he took passage on a ship to Spain, the exact opposite direction in which he should have gone. A storm arose, and to quiet the waves, the sailors had to throw Jonah overboard. Jonah spent 3 days in the belly of a fish before he repented, and then was spewed out on the beach. In angry obedience, Jonah walked to Nineveh, to do what God commanded. He walked into the city, stood up on a box, and preached: “Repent or God will destroy you all in 40 days”. That’s all. And the people repented, from the King to the lowest peasant, in sackcloth and ashes. So, God forgave them all. Jonah, in his anger that they had repented, left the city and climbed a hill to watch God destroy the city—because as a good Jew, that was what he truly wanted. So, to teach him a lesson, God sent a plant to give him shelter; and Jonah loved the plant, The next day however the plant died, and Jonah was angry at God for its death. “Are you right to feel anger at the death of the plant, which was not yours?” asked God. “So why do you still want me to destroy all those people who belong to me, and who have repented? Besides there’s a lot of cattle there too.”

Note how Jonah upholds the traditional attitude of the Jewish people towards gentiles. Jonah refused to obey God and tried to get as far away from God that he could—so much for Jonah being a good prophet. Finally, when Jonah realized he could not run far enough

away to get away from God, he gives in, and against his own wishes, decides to obey God. He travels to Nineveh and preaches the shortest and best sermon in the world—because as a result of that sermon, the whole city repents and asks God for forgiveness. No sermon has ever been so successful. None.

But Jonah was still angry. That's what he had been afraid of, why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place—he was afraid that God would actually forgive those terrible pagan gentiles. It was just like God to do that. Surely God would see that they should all be destroyed. After all, standard Jewish morality said they were all devilish, and were headed for hell. They were gentiles, and therefore outside of God's mercy or love.

Jonah went outside the city and sat down on a hill to watch the destruction of the gentiles. So, God decides to teach him a lesson—that's what the story of the plant (a gourd with big leaves) was all about. Jonah was happy to have the shade the first day, and bitter when in one night, the gourd lay dead. As God asked: "Are you angry for the little gourd which you did **not** make; and yet want me to destroy all those people whom I **did** make?" Jonah finally gets the point, at least we hope so—but just to rub it in, God says: "besides there's a lot of cattle in that city, so being a good Jew, you didn't want me to destroy them too, did you?"

The story may be fiction, yet it carries a great truth, and it is right to have it in the Bible—God loves everyone, not just Jews or Christians—but everyone, and He wants to forgive everyone when they repent and confess their sins. God has no favourites. He loves us all and waits for us to come to our senses and repent, so that He can forgive and lead us together into eternal life.

Are you like Jonah nursing some anger against another, or against a group of people? That anger is preventing God's Grace from working wonderfully in your life. For the Jewish people before the time of Jesus, it was gentiles they resented. For us, it may be Muslims, or atheists, or some other group—or politicians or liberals or criminals or even your neighbour? Our anger towards them (even if the anger is deserved) is a block in us that prevents God's Grace from building the Kingdom of God in us like God wants. Have you found yourself running away from what you know is God's will?

It is time to turn around, to ask God for forgiveness, to ask God to clean out your heart and soul, and to put you on the path to doing God's will. When you come to the Altar today to receive the Blessed Sacrament, leave your resentments, and sin at the Altar, and return forgiven and blessed. I pray that this will be so in your heart today.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

[If you liked this sermon, may I suggest that you read "Elijah, a prophet of God."]