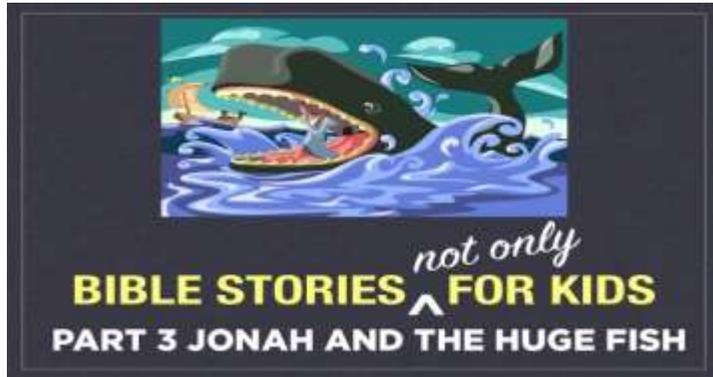


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Generations of Sunday School children have listened with wide-eyed amazement at the story of the big fish that caught a man. We love this story, yet for all our telling and re-telling, we barely understand what it means.

It is commonly said that Christianity is supremely a religion of grace. And that is certainly true. We sing about grace, we write poems about grace, we name our churches and our children after grace. Grace is hard to accept, hard to believe, and hard to receive.

God's grace shocks us in what it offers. It is truly not of this world. It frightens us with what it does for sinners like you and me. Grace teaches us that God does for others what we would never do for them. We would save the not-so-bad people. God starts with prostitutes and then works downward from there. Grace is a gift that costs everything to the Giver and nothing to the receiver. It is given to those who don't deserve it, barely recognize it, and hardly appreciate it.

The teaching about grace may be the hardest doctrine in the Bible to accept. It's not that grace is hard to understand. We know what the word means. Our problem comes in the application. Grace asks us to accept two things we don't want to accept: 1) There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. 2) If God doesn't save us, we will never be saved. Nothing more clearly summarizes the true meaning of grace than the simple phrase found Jonah 2:9c, "...Salvation comes from the Lord (NIV)."

That statement is both striking and humorous because it comes from the world's worst missionary - Jonah. As we begin our journey with Jonah, let's clarify one point: Jonah is not the hero of the story. God is! At the beginning he is running from God; at the end he is arguing with God. In between he is praying and preaching. He's not a hero. He's an anti-hero.

Here are things we can learn from Jonah's story...

God Is Serious When He Calls You

The story begins this way in Jonah 1:1-2, "1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai:2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me (NIV)."" It's amazing, isn't it, how just one sentence can change your life. You can be driving on the road and get one phone call that changes your life forever. If it's good news, your life changes one way. If it's bad news, it changes in another way. Either way, your life can be turned upside down with just one phone call. Life can "Turn on a Dime". That's what happened to Jonah when God spoke seven little words: "Go to the great city of Nineveh."

The Assyrians had a reputation for cruelty that is hard for us to understand. Their specialty was brutality of a gross and disgusting kind. This is the reason why Jews hated the Assyrians. Hated them for their bloodthirsty cruelty. They also hated them for their idolatry and arrogance. For a Jewish man to be told by God to go preach to Nineveh was disgusting. As far as Jonah was concerned, Nineveh could go straight to hell. "Go ahead, Lord. What qualifies as Nineveh today? Nineveh is whatever pulls you out of your comfort zone Nineveh is the place God calls where you don't want to go. Nineveh is the people who have hurt you deeply and God says, "Go and give them my message." Nineveh is the place God calls where you don't want to go. Nineveh is danger. Nineveh is discomfort. Nineveh is whatever you hate that God loves deeply.

But all of us are called to do great things for God. And let me tell you, "Take God's calling seriously because He is serious about Your calling."

God will Bring You Back

Jonah 1:3 - "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord (NIV)."

Why did the reluctant prophet run from God? He didn't want to go to Nineveh. He didn't care about Nineveh. He didn't think God should care about Nineveh. He didn't want them to repent. He didn't want a God who loved people like that. It was perfectly fine with him if God sent them straight to hell. In fact, that was his preference. Jonah's problem was never ultimately about Nineveh. Jonah's problem was always with God. It's a statement about what happens when we disobey God's call. Any time you run from God, you never go "up"; you always go "down."

This is the "severe mercy" of the Lord. When a society decides that it doesn't need God, his response is not always to bring out the lightning and thunder. More often than not, God says, "If you want to jump off the cliff, I have warned you time and again, but if that's what you want to do, I will not stop you."

When we decide to disobey God, there is always a boat going to Tarshish. And there is always room for one more passenger. When we decide to run from the Lord, Satan is happy to provide the transportation. . It is the patience of God that allows us to run away. It is the providence of God that sends the storm. It is the kindness of God that sends the great fish

If God didn't care, he would let us go on in our sin forever.

Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death (NIV)."

Three Thoughts to Ponder:

. Every step out of the will of God is a downward step.

No one ever disobeyed God and went up. You only go down. "Down" to Joppa (v. 3). "Down" into the ship (v. 5). "Down" into the sea. "Down" in the belly of the great fish.

. We get away quickly, we recover slowly.

It's easy to go down, easy to get off the right path, easy to fall into sin. But the road back is difficult and often very painful. So if I were you, don't run away from God. Run toward Him.

. Satan can work through circumstances just like God can.

Satan has his ships, and he always has room on his ships. His ships always go where we want to go when we're running from God. He can make disobedience look good by means of favorable circumstances.



- 1.) Have you ever run away from God's call in your life, and have you obeyed God's call and share what happened?**
- 2.) What important lessons have you learned from the experience ?**
- 3.) What is the condition of your heart in terms of obedience?**