

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Jonah

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You Can Run but You Can't Hide

The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."

But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish.

But the Lord hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

But all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold. – Jonah 1:1-5 ESV

Jonah and the whale. It sounds like the title of a best-selling children's book, complete with colorful pictures of Jonah and his new, oversized friend. But this is not a fairy tale told for the sake of children. It is a true story that describes real events and real people, and points to the gracious and merciful nature of God Almighty. One of the main reasons we believe this story to be true is because Jesus, the Son of God, believed to be true. In one of His many confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." And He responded, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:39-42 ESV).

Jesus refers to the story of Jonah and mentions the people of Nineveh, not as if they were make-believe characters in a made-up story, but as flesh-and-blood people who lived real lives and experienced a radical redemption by God because they repented. Jesus viewed the story of Jonah, as found in the Old Testament Scriptures, as an illustration of the redemption of God that was coming to the people of the world through His own death, burial and resurrection. Like all of the Old Testament, the book of Jonah pointed to Jesus. And Jesus not only believed this to be true, He proved it. We are told that when He appeared in His post-resurrection body to the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, He provided them with a comprehensive Bible study, showing them how all of the Scriptures pointed to Him.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. – Luke 24:27 ESV

The book of Jonah, like the rest of the Old Testament, contains real events about real people. And it is, like the rest of the Bible, part of God's revelation of Himself. The Bible is a

comprehensive story about God and His relationship with mankind. It tells us how we got here. It describes how sin entered the world and how man's relationship with God took a dramatic turn for the worse. It reveals God's decision to choose a people as His own possession, the Jews, and graciously provide them with an undeserved relationship with Him, in spite of their sins and stubbornness. He gave them His law, in order to show them the life of holiness He expected, but then provided them with the sacrificial system, because He knew they could not live up to His holy standards. He knew they would sin and require forgiveness in order to maintain a right standing with Him. And the Jewish people were to be examples to the rest of the world, showing them that a relationship with God was only possible through either perfect obedience, which was impossible, or reliance upon His forgiveness, made possible through the shedding of blood. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that, under the law of Moses, "almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22 ESV).

But the people of Israel proved to be lousy models to the rest of the world. Their relationship with God was hit-or-miss, marred by rebellion and stubbornness, characterized by disobedience and marked by a sense of privilege. They saw their relationship with God as a badge of honor. They viewed themselves as special and somehow better than all those around them. And while they were God's chosen people, they failed to understand and live up to their role as His witnesses to the nations. So, when God commanded Jonah, a Jew, to go to the people of Nineveh, he was not interested. Nineveh was a city in Assyria, in what is now modern-day Iraq. The Assyrians were enemies of the Jews. They were pagans and a constant threat to the Jewish people, so you can see why Jonah was less-than-enthusiastic about God's call to go and prophesy among them. Jonah knew he would be facing a hostile crowd, and the message he was given by God was not exactly a pleasant one. God had told him to, "Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are" (Jonah 1:2 ESV). Can you imagine the kind of welcome Jonah, a Jew, would receive from a crowd of anti-Jewish Assyrians, when he tells them that Yahweh, the God of the Jews, is bringing judgment on them because of their wickedness? So, Jonah came up with a plan B. He decided to run rather than risk his life.

But there is another motive behind Jonah's refusal to do what God had called him to do. He was a prophet of God and he knew that, as a prophet, his message of God's judgment had a more important purpose behind it: Repentance. Just as every other prophet of God had been commanded to preach God's coming judgment to the people of Israel in order that they might repent and return to Him, Jonah was being commanded to preach God's coming judgment to Assyrians. He was the first and only prophet of God to be tasked with the job of taking God's message of judgment and call to repentance to a pagan nation. And he was smart enough to know that his message was not going to be well received. And, if by some miraculous means, the people of Nineveh listened to what he had to say and repented, Jonah knew that God would forgive them. And that was probably a worse fear to Jonah than the thought of them putting him to death. He hated the Assyrians and did not want to see God extend His mercy and grace to them.

So, he ran. He refused to do what God had called him to do. The text tells us Jonah, “went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord” (Jonah 1:3 ESV). That line sounds almost a bit humorous. Did Jonah really think he could get away from God? Was he dumb enough to think he could somehow escape the sight of the all-knowing, all-seeing, God of the universe? As a good Jew, Jonah would have been familiar with the psalm of David, where he wrote:

*I can never escape from your Spirit!
 I can never get away from your presence!
 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
 if I go down to the grave, you are there.
 If I ride the wings of the morning,
 if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 and your strength will support me.
 I could ask the darkness to hide me
 and the light around me to become night—
 but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
 To you the night shines as bright as day.
 Darkness and light are the same to you. – Psalm 139:7-12 NLT*

And yet, Jonah disregards the wisdom of David and take off. He books passage on a boat headed in the opposite direction. But God does not let him get far. He sends a storm – a violent, sailor-scaring storm, that had them all praying to their respective gods for help. All except Jonah. He was fast asleep in the hold of the ship. The anger of God was clearly recognizable to the sailors, even though they did not know Yahweh as their god. But they knew they were in trouble and assumed it had something to do with their deity of choice, so they each prayed, and did all they could do to keep the boat afloat in the crashing waves and relentless winds. And all the while, Jonah slept.

Jonah was content with his decision. He obviously lost no sleep over his choice to disobey God. He had been given a command by God and a crystal-clear message to speak to the people of Nineveh, but he had refused to obey.

But before we make this story all about Jonah, let’s remember who instigated this whole affair. It was God. Like the rest of the Bible, the story of Jonah is really the story of God and His relationship with mankind. It is about the God of the universe and His sovereign will over the lives of those He had made. The story of Jonah is the story of God’s redemption of lost, sinful men and women. The people of Nineveh did not deserve to hear from God. They had done nothing to merit a chance to hear of God’s judgment and escape by repenting of their sins. But neither had the Jews. In fact, God had made it clear to the Jews, all the way back in the days of Moses, that there had been nothing special about them that had earned them His favor.

For you are a holy people, who belong to the Lord your God. Of all the people on earth, the Lord your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure.

The Lord did not set his heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the Lord loves you, and he was keeping the oath he had sworn to your ancestors. – Deuteronomy 7:6-8 NLT

It was simply God's love and faithfulness to His own word that provide them with their unique relationship with Him. They had done nothing to deserve or earn it. And Moses went on to warn the Jews:

But he does not hesitate to punish and destroy those who reject him. Therefore, you must obey all these commands, decrees, and regulations I am giving you today. – Deuteronomy 7:10-11 NLT

And they had failed. They had not lived up to God's holy standard. They had proven to be rebellious and disobedient to God. And now, God was sending His message of judgment and call to repentance to a pagan nation. He was going to use non-Jews to show His own people how they should respond to His call and escape the coming judgment. And Jonah wanted no part in it. So, he slept. But God was not done with him yet. His will was going to be done, whether Jonah like it or not.

When Our Will Resists God's

So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."

Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?"

Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the Lord. "Oh, why did you do it?" they groaned. And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, "What should we do to you to stop this storm?"

"Throw me into the sea," Jonah said, "and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault." – Jonah 1:6-12 ESV

Jonah was a prophet. Well, it might be safer to say that he was a reluctant, runaway prophet. At this point in the story, there is no indication that Jonah had ever been a prophet of God before. It seems from the opening verses of the book, that he had just received His prophet's commission from God and, rather than accept it, Jonah decided to make a run for it. Jonah knew exactly what God was commanding him to do and he was well aware of what the job of a prophet entailed. He just didn't consider himself to be the right man for the job. And it would appear that he considered the Ninevites the wrong people to be given a chance to repent and gain the favor and forgiveness of God.

But Jonah was not the first man to be a reluctant prophet. When God approached Jeremiah and told him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5 ESV), Jeremiah responded, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jeremiah 1:6 ESV). He didn't feel qualified or equipped for the job either. But Jonah's reluctance was based on more than fear. He had a hatred for the people of Nineveh, because they were Assyrians and enemies of the Jews. It will not be until the last chapter of the book that Jonah will confess the true cause of his attempted escape to Tarshish. When he sees that God has extended mercy to the people of Nineveh, he will say, "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen" (Jonah 4:2-3 ESV). He would rather die than see the people of

Nineveh spared by God. And his initial attempt to run from God was a sign that he would rather die as a rebel than play a part in God's redemption of the people of Nineveh.

So, when the ship in which Jonah sailed encountered the storm, he remained asleep in the hold. He most likely had resigned himself to his fate. He knew God was not going to let him get away with his rebellion. But the sailors on the ship were in a panic. They knew their lives were in danger, which had prompted them to call out to their various gods, in an attempt to gain some kind of divine help. So, the captain woke Jonah up and confronted him, saying, "How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives" (Jonah 1:6 NLT). The sailors even cast lots in order to determine who might be the one who was responsible for this obvious divinely ordained disaster. And the lot fell to Jonah. And this should not surprise us. We read in the book of Proverbs: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33 ESV).

When the sailors saw that Jonah was somehow responsible, they peppered him with questions: "Why has this awful storm come down on us? Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?" (Jonah 1:8 NLT). And Jonah revealed that he was a Hebrew, a worshiper of Yahweh, the creator of the sea and the land. That bit of news terrified the sailors. In their minds, they were dealing with some sort of water god. This could not be good. But what were they to do? How could they appease this god of the Hebrews? And when Jonah revealed that he had run away from his God, they only had two questions: "Why did you do it?" and "What are we going to do about it?"

And Jonah knew exactly what needed to happen. He was the cause of the problem and his death was the only cure. Or so he thought. His response to the sailors' questions reveals that he would rather face death at the hands of God than go to Nineveh and face the prospect of seeing the people repent and be spared by God.

"Throw me into the sea," Jonah said, "and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault." – Jonah 1:12 NLT

Jonah accepted responsibility for the storm but refused to confess his sin to God. He would rather die than obey God. For whatever reason, Jonah held a deep and bitter hatred for the people of Nineveh. As we saw earlier, when God eventually spared the people of Nineveh, Jonah had the temerity to demand that God kill him. He preferred death at the hands of God over having to watch God show mercy to pagans.

There is no doubt that the city of Nineveh was inhabited by wicked people. The Assyrians were known for their barbarism and had proven to be a constant thorn in the side of the Israelites. So, it is not surprising that Jonah was repulsed by the idea of being God's messenger to these people. He knew that God's prophets were commissioned to carry His message of judgment, but with an underlying purpose of calling people to repentance. And God had been gracious enough to send prophet after prophet to the people of Israel, warning them of judgment and calling them to return to Him in repentance. So, Jonah knew that God was merciful and slow to

anger. He had seen God's patience with Israel. And the idea of God offering this same mercy and forgiveness to pagans was more than he could handle.

But we see in the early stages of this story, that God has a heart for all mankind. His love and affection were not limited to the people of Israel. Even the wicked people of Nineveh were going to be given a chance to repent of their sinful ways. We will see later on, that when Jonah finally makes it to Nineveh and preaches the message God had given him to preach, the people of Nineveh respond.

On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. – Jonah 3:4-5 NLT

Even the king and his nobles will issue a decree, stating:

"No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us." – Jonah 3:7-9 NLT

Jonah had been reluctant, but the people of Nineveh were not. He had initially refused to obey the word of God, but the people of Nineveh had not. He had done evil rather than obey God. They had agreed to turn from evil rather than face the judgment of God. Jonah had preferred being thrown into the stormy sea, while the people of Nineveh chose to throw themselves on the mercy of God. The pagan people of Nineveh proved to be more obedient, submissive, and repentant than the prophet of God. God was able to accomplish His divine will in spite of Jonah's stubborn and resistant will. Not only could Jonah not run from God, but he could also not deter, delay or, in any way, derail the will of God.

Prophet Overboard

Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. – Jonah 1:13-17 ESV

Jonah has just confessed to his shipmates that he has run from the Lord. He has admitted to them that he is the cause of the storm they are having to endure. And he has offered to give up his life in order to save theirs. But this was not some altruistic move on Jonah's part. He knew that death was the only way he would ever escape God's command to take His message of judgment to Nineveh. So, Jonah told the men, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you" (Jonah 1:12 ESV). And that is exactly what they ended up doing, but not before they desperately tried to make it to land. They seemed quite reluctant to take Jonah's life. But in the end, as the severity of the storm grew worse, they realized they had no other choice. "So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging" (Jonah 1:15 ESV), and "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9 ESV) immediately calmed the storm. The winds ceased and the waves calmed.

All of this is reminiscent of a scene that took place in Jesus' life. One day, He and His disciples boarded a fishing boat in order to sail across the Sea of Galilee. But not long after launching off, they found themselves in a terrible storm. And as the disciples panicked and rowed for their lives, Jesus, like Jonah, slept through the whole thing. Mark tells us the rest of the story:

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" – Mark 4:38-41 ESV

And when the disciples woke Jesus up, He took matters into His own hands. He became the solution to their problem. He spoke to the wind and the sea, and the wind ceased, and the waves calmed. And like the men on the boat with Jonah, the disciples were filled with awe and fear. It is interesting to note that Jonah, a rebellious and reluctant prophet was forced to sacrifice his life so that others might live. And while Jesus simply had to speak to the storm in

order to save the lives of the disciples that day, it would not be long before He too would sacrifice His life so that others might live. And if you recall, Jesus will later make a comparison between His sacrifice and that of Jonah.

“For just 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.” – Matthew 12:40 ESV

The context of Jesus’ words was an encounter with the scribes and Pharisees. They had come to Him, demanding that He perform some kind of a sign for them. But Jesus responded, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matthew 12:39 ESV). And then He spoke the words predicting His impending death. The men who asked Jesus to perform a sign for them had already determined that He was a fraud. They had no intention of believing in Him, no matter what He did. And Jesus knew it. He knew their hearts were hardened by unbelief, and the only sign they would be given would be His ultimate death, burial and resurrection. Even then, they would reject Him and refuse to accept His resurrection as a reality. They would even play a major part in His death, in an attempt to get rid of Him.

Let’s go back to the scene of Jesus and His disciples in the boat. He calmed the sea, and the disciples are amazed. The text tells us, “they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:41 ESV). And Jesus confronts them for their lack of faith. “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40 ESV). They had seen Jesus do many miracles. They had heard His teachings and watched Him do many amazing things. But they were still unsure as to just exactly who He was. Their faith was still in its infancy. They were still coming to know Jesus and learning to trust Him.

And the scribes and Pharisees also struggled with faith. Theirs was non-existent. To them, Jesus was nothing but a charlatan and a potential threat to their way of life. He was swaying the hearts of the people with teachings that were contrary to their own. They saw Him as seditious and dangerous to their own cause. So, they refused to believe anything He said. And even the “sign of Jonah”, His own death, burial and resurrection, would not sway them.

What about Jonah? He had a faith problem as well. It wasn’t that He didn’t believe in God. He knew God was fully capable of calling the people of Nineveh to repentance. That’s exactly why he had run. He will later admit to God, “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” (Jonah 4:2 ESV). He had full confidence that God could and would spare the people of Nineveh, but he wanted nothing to do with it. And Jonah also knew that God would calm the storm as soon as the men threw him overboard. So, what was his faith problem? He refused to believe that God’s way was the best way. He was unwilling to accept God’s will regarding the people of Nineveh. He knew God could but wrestled with why God *would*. A big part of faith is learning to trust that God knows best. For instance, if you were to suddenly learn that you have cancer, you would most likely pray, in faith, that God would heal

you. And rightly so. You would do so because you have been taught that your God is fully capable of healing diseases of all kinds. But the even greater display of faith would be to accept God's will regarding the outcome. In other words, trusting God that He is well aware of your cancer and has some greater plan in store for you to which you are ignorant. That requires great faith. Jonah could see no good coming out of the Ninevites repenting. He wanted to see them destroyed by God. And he assumed that if he refused to go and preach to them, they would not repent and, therefore, be judged and destroyed by God. But Jonah's faith in God was too small. He thought he could thwart God's plan by running away. He was even willing to sacrifice God's messenger by having himself thrown overboard by the sailors. But Jonah had a lot to learn about God. As do we all.

Jonah went overboard. He was thrown into the sea, but his rash action didn't do a thing to stop God's plan. God calmed the sea and spared the sailors, but He would also spare Jonah. He would provide a means of salvation. Jonah would be literally swallowed up and find himself as good as dead. But just when he thought all was lost, God would come through. God would "resurrect" Jonah and give him a second chance to do His will. But as we will see, Jonah's time spent in the belly of the fish would be a watershed moment for him. He would learn an incredible valuable lesson: "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Jonah 2:9 ESV).

Gone but Not Forgotten

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

*“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’
The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.
When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!”*

And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. – Jonah 2:1-10 ESV

Jonah thought he was a dead man. He had been thrown into the sea by the sailors in an attempt to appease God’s wrath, and it had worked. The sea and wind had calmed, but Jonah had sunk under the water. And in his mind, his life was over. Jonah describes his predicament in stark terms: “You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me; I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves” (Jonah 2:3 NLT).

Jonah was going to drown, and he knew it. And he knew he deserved it. He had blatantly disobeyed the command of God. Jonah had doubted that God knew what was best, both for himself and the people of Nineveh. And it looked like death was going to be the outcome for his disobedience. Jonah describes what he experienced: “I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!” (Jonah 2:5-6 NLT).

What God had done was send a great fish. Nowhere does the text mention a whale, but when we think of a sea creature large enough to swallow a man whole, a whale is what comes to mind. But regardless of what kind of sea creature it was, God sent it and it literally snatched Jonah from the jaws of death. Jonah went from drowning to being swallowed alive. But to him, that was a blessing. Because Jonah had cried out to God for deliverance. As he had been in the process of sinking under the waves, he had prayed to God for help.

*“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice” – Jonah 2:2 ESV*

For the Hebrew, Sheol was the place where the departed spirits of the dead went. Jonah thought he was going to join the dead. And it seems that his prayer was borrowed from a psalm of David.

*“The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.” – Psalm 18:4-5 ESV*

Jonah was quoting Old Testament Scripture as he struggled to stay afloat and alive. Even in the process of drowning, he had the composure to pray to God. He realized that he had turned his back on God and yet, in his predicament, he was completely dependent upon God for salvation.

*“As my life was slipping away,
I remembered the Lord.
And my earnest prayer went out to you
in your holy Temple.” – Jonah 2:7 NLT*

And God heard him and rescued him. God sent the fish. It’s interesting to note that Jonah conceived of being swallowed alive as a form of salvation. He didn’t suddenly turn his concern from drowning to being slowly and painfully digested while still alive. No, Jonah saw this as a sign from God. He had called out for salvation and God had sent it. In the form a very large fish.

We don't know what Jonah had in mind when he called out to God. We have no way of knowing what kind of salvation he was looking for. It is likely that Jonah didn't really care. All he knew was that he was drowning and about to die. He left the means of salvation up to God, and God delivered him. It's amazing how we can be so specific with God when we have something we want from Him. Our prayers can be very detailed and our requests, quite to the point. But when we find ourselves in a hopeless place, where all seems lost, we tend to pray more dependently and in a far less demanding tone. We simply ask God for rescue. And we really don't care what form that rescue takes. For Jonah, it took the unlikely and miraculous form of a giant fish. He went from the jaws of death to the literal jaws of a fish. And many of us, had we been in Jonah's place, would have found reason to argue with God over His chosen means of rescue. We would have said, "Really, God! You call this a rescue! This is the best you can do?!"

But Jonah was more than satisfied. He somehow knew that this was part of God's plan. He said, "yet I shall again look upon your holy temple" (Jonah 2:4 ESV). He had hope. He could see the hand of God in the form of the fish. And he praised God for His love and salvation.

*"Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!" – Jonah 2:8-9 ESV*

He was in the process of being rescued by a loving, all-powerful God. He was not dependent upon some man-made idol that sat on a shelf and lacked any ability to hear prayers, let alone answer them. It had been Jonah's God who had rescued the pagan sailors by calming the sea and the storm. It had been Jonah's God who had heard his cry from the depths of the sea and sent a savior in the form of a fish. I can't help but think of the words of Paul: "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54 ESV). As hard as it is for us to believe, the swallowing of Jonah by the fish was actually a form of victory for him. It was what kept him from drowning. As strange and bizarre as it may sound to us, his time in the belly of the fish was part of God's preferred means of rescue. In a way, all of this is tied to what Jesus referred to as "the sign of Jonah". If you recall, Jesus had told the religious leaders that the only sign they would see was the sign of Jonah. He would die on the cross. He would then be buried or swallowed up by the grave. But then He would rise again three days later. And that is exactly what happened to Jonah. He effectively died in the sea, was swallowed by the fish, and delivered safe and sound, three days later, on the beach. Here is what the text says happened:

*And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.
– Jonah 2:10 ESV*

Jonah lived. He had been delivered by God from a death he most certainly deserved. Jonah had rebelled against the God of the universe and lived to talk about it. And what a dramatic lesson that should have been for Jonah. Here was a man who had refused to take God's warning of

judgment to the people of Nineveh because he didn't believe they deserved it. And yet, God had rescued him in spite of his own sin and rebellion. God had redeemed Jonah from death, not because Jonah deserved it, but simply because it was His will for Jonah to live.

You would think that an experience like the one Jonah had would be truly life changing and transformative. And it was, to a degree. God had his attention. But did God have his whole heart? Was Jonah a changed man? Time will tell and the rest of the book of Jonah will reveal just how this experience impacted Jonah. One of the things we will learn is that salvation by God can have a life-changing effect on us. But once saved, we sometimes have a bad habit of forgetting just how great a salvation we experienced. We begin to forget just how bad our situation was before God stepped in. The apostle Paul had a way of reminding the believers in his day not to forget their pre-cross condition.

Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. – 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NLT

He told the Ephesian believers:

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world...But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. – Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-6 NLT

We were as good as dead. But we were rescued from death by an unlikely, unbelievable means. God sent His Son to swallow up death by dying and then rising from the dead. And we were raised with Him.

*For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.
– Romans 6:4 NLT*

Changed by God

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.
– Jonah 3:1-5 ESV

God gave Jonah a second chance. And He appeared to Jonah a second time and gave him a second commission. But it's interesting to compare the content of those two commissions. In chapter one, we read that God said, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2 ESV). The second time, God said, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you" (Jonah 3:2 ESV). This time, God evidently gave Jonah the exact message He wanted conveyed. We are not told what that message was, but the words that Jonah used are recorded for us: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4 ESV). Was that the message God had given Jonah, or had he taken liberties with the wording? We don't know for certain. But it's interesting to note that the word, "overthrown" is the Hebrew word, *haphak* and it can mean to overthrow, upturn, turn or transform. It is the same word used in the book of Genesis in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

*Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he **overthrew** those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.* – Genesis 19:24-25 ESV

God transformed those two wicked cities by completely destroying them. He turned them into rubble. And I have a feeling that when Jonah gave his message to the people of Nineveh, that is exactly what he was hoping the outcome would be for them. He probably enjoyed walking through the streets of Nineveh, telling them their city was going to be transformed into a heap of rubble. Calling down God's judgment and wrath on a city full of sinful pagans came easy to Jonah. But what Jonah didn't seem to understand was that the overthrow or upturning of Nineveh was going to be dramatically different than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. There was not going to be any sulfur and fire. There would not be any death and destruction. Jonah was in for a surprise.

The text simply tells us, "And the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5 ESV). We're told that they immediately "called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5 ESV). What was it they believed? They heard the word of warning from God regarding their eminent destruction and they believed it to be true. Now, it is important to note that the message Jonah preached contained no specifics. He provided them with no details regarding what it was they had done to deserve their overthrow. He pointed out

no specific sins or acts of wickedness. And there was no call to repentance or demand from God that they turn from their wicked ways. All Jonah had said was that their overthrow was coming in 40 days.

Compare the message of Jonah with that of the prophet, Jeremiah:

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
declares the Lord,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water. – Jeremiah 2:12-13 ESV*

God had been very specific regarding the sins of Israel. We find them outlined in great detail throughout chapters two and three of the Book of Jeremiah. But God also had Jeremiah call them to repentance.

*“Return, faithless Israel,
declares the Lord.
I will not look on you in anger,
for I am merciful,
declares the Lord;
I will not be angry forever.
Only acknowledge your guilt,
that you rebelled against the Lord your God
and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree,
and that you have not obeyed my voice,
declares the Lord.” – Jeremiah 3:12-13 ESV*

God offered them a chance to repent of their sins and to return to Him. He would show them mercy and grant them forgiveness. But we see no such offer in the message of Jonah. He simply warned them of their coming destruction. But they believed that what he said was true and they put on sack cloth and ashes – from the greatest of them to the least of them. They had no guarantee that God would spare them if they did so. They had been offered no mercy. They had been given no hope of a reprieve. But they were a religious people. They had their own gods and knew that their only hope was if they could somehow satisfy the deity who was angry with them. And since Jonah was a Hebrew and spoke for the Hebrew God, they did the only thing they knew to do: They mourned and called out to Him. And we will see that this attitude of repentance will permeate the entire society, all the way to the royal palace. Even the king would hear the words of Jonah and believe.

But let's go back to the book of Jeremiah and God's indictment against the people of Israel. Here were the people of God, who had rebelled against Him and were being called to repent of their sins and return to Him. And this was not the first time God had sent a prophet to warn them of their coming destruction and call them to repentance. In fact, earlier in the book of Jeremiah, God exposes their track record of stubbornness and gives Jonah his assignment:

"From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

"So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.'" – Jeremiah 7:25-28 ESV

What an interesting contrast. Here you have Jonah, the Hebrew prophet, who initially refused to obey God's command and take His message to the people of Nineveh, finally doing what God had called Him to do. And the people of Nineveh hear his words and believe. They take God at His word and realize that their destruction is eminent. No mercy offered. No hope of reprieve. Yet they mourn and call out to God. Unlike the stiff-necked people of God, they bow their knees to Yahweh and beg for His mercy.

Which takes us back to that Hebrew word, *haphak*. Remember, it can mean to overthrow, but also to turn or transform. In the book of Exodus, it is the word used to describe the rod of Aaron turning into a snake or the water of the Nile turning into blood. In the book of Deuteronomy, it is used to speak of God turning the curse of Balaam into a blessing. It is a word that speaks of transformation or change. And that is exactly what we see happening in Nineveh. Jonah thought the transformation was going to come in the form of destruction, but instead, it came in the form of repentance. The great and powerful city of Nineveh was brought to its knees. The pagan people of Nineveh were calling out to the God of the Hebrews. What a radical change. What a transformation.

In the book of 1 Samuel, we are told the story of how God called Saul to be the first king of Israel. In chapter 10, he is anointed with oil by the prophet, Samuel, and commissioned to be king. And then it says, "When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart" (1 Samuel 10:9 ESV). The word "gave" is the same Hebrew word, *haphak*. God transformed Saul. He gave him a new heart.

One of the things Jonah seems to have overlooked, was the power of God to transform. God can overthrow a people in any of a number of ways. He can destroy them, or He can redeem them. He can turn them to dust or He can turn their hearts to Himself. He is sovereign and all-powerful. Jonah was looking for destruction. But God was planning something completely different. A pagan, sinful and doomed people heard a message of judgment and they were

changed. Rather than reject the message and kill the messenger, like the Israelites had done so many times, they bowed their knees to God. And as we will see, their transformation didn't stop there.

God Saves

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. – Jonah 3:6-10 ESV

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. It was a large city, and it is believed that it contained a population of at least 1 million people. The Assyrians were known for their military prowess and their cruelty. They were far from being barbarians, though. Nineveh was a great city, and its inhabitants would have been civilized and somewhat sophisticated. Yet, God had deemed them as wicked. And He had told Jonah to warn them of their coming destruction. That message had made a dramatic impact on the people, leaving them in a state of mourning, wearing sackcloth and ashes. And when the king of Nineveh, who would have been the king over all Assyria, heard the message of Jonah, he too reacted the same way. We're told, "removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:6 ESV). This great king who ruled over one of the most powerful nations of that time, took the warning of God seriously, and he issued a decree that was sent throughout the entire city.

No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. – Jonah 3:7-8 NLT

He proclaimed a city-wide fast that was to include even the animals. Everyone and everything were to be covered in sackcloth and ashes. But not only that, the people were to "stop all their violence". In other words, they were to change their ways. And that word, translated "violence" is the Hebrew word *chamac* and it means "violence, wrong, cruelty, injustice" ("H2555 – *chamac* – Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible). It was used of someone who misused their power over others in an unjust and cruel manner. The Assyrians were conquerors, and they were known for their extreme cruelty toward the nations they defeated. But there were probably all kinds of "violence" and injustice taking place within the walls of the city. And the king knew that this was the basis of God's warning of impending destruction. They were going to have to change their ways. So, he issued a proclamation.

The prophet, Nahum, would later pen these words regarding the city of Ninevah, as part of God's words against them.

*What sorrow awaits Nineveh,
 the city of murder and lies!
 She is crammed with wealth
 and is never without victims.
 Hear the crack of whips,
 the rumble of wheels!
 Horses' hooves pound,
 and chariots clatter wildly.
 See the flashing swords and glittering spears
 as the charioteers charge past!
 There are countless casualties,
 heaps of bodies—
 so many bodies that
 people stumble over them. – Nahum 3:1-3 ESV*

Violence and cruelty were part of their DNA. It was in their nature. And it was through violence and cruelty that they had become a great nation. And yet, the king of Nineveh knew that what they were guilty. He was well aware that their behavior was wrong, and they were far from innocent. And he hoped that their change in behavior would garner them the favor of God.

Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us. – Jonah 3:9 NLT

The prophet, Isaiah, wrote some very harsh words to the people of Israel regarding their practice of fasting.

*“We have fasted before you!” they say.
 ‘Why aren’t you impressed?
 We have been very hard on ourselves,
 and you don’t even notice it!’*

*“I will tell you why!” I respond.
 “It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves.
 Even while you fast,
 you keep oppressing your workers.
 What good is fasting
 when you keep on fighting and quarreling?
 This kind of fasting
 will never get you anywhere with me.
 You humble yourselves
 by going through the motions of penance,
 bowing your heads
 like reeds bending in the wind.
 You dress in burlap*

*and cover yourselves with ashes.
Is this what you call fasting?
Do you really think this will please the Lord?” – Isaiah 58:3-5 NLT*

The people of Israel were guilty of going through the motions. They were prone to act like they were sorrowful, while continuing to do the very things for which they were supposedly fasting and mourning over. But in the pagan city of Nineveh, the king and his people vowed to change their ways. They were willing to repent, to change their minds and their actions regarding the very things that had made them a great nation and a formidable city. They were known and feared for the cruelty. And yet, they were willing to give it all up in order to escape the wrath of God.

It is important to point out that this was probably not a repentance leading to salvation. They were simply wanting to escape death. But they believed the word of the prophet and took seriously the threat that Yahweh, the god of the Jews was powerful enough to do what He said He would do. And so, they bowed in reverence and awe to Him. This was not a wholesale conversion of the population of the city of Nineveh. But it was a transformation or turning of their hearts from the pagan gods to the one true God. During this point in time, they knew that their hopes of salvation were in the hands of the Hebrew God, not their own. So, they called out to Him, and God spared them.

*When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened. – Jonah 3:10
NLT*

Did their actions change God’s mind? Was God somehow convinced to alter His plans and go from destroying the city of Nineveh to sparing it? One of the main messages contained with the book of Jonah is the sovereignty of God. He is in control. Jonah could try and run from Him, but God controlled the wind, waves and the sea. Jonah could try and end his own life in an attempt to thwart the plan of God, but God controlled the creatures in the sea. And when God had originally told Jonah to “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2 ESV), it was a clear indication that He was fully aware of all that was going on within the walls of the city of Nineveh. God is omniscient. God is omnipresent. And God knew exactly what was going to happen before it happened. Yes, He had given Jonah a message.

“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” – Jonah 3:4 ESV

But as we saw earlier, that word, “overthrown” has a variety of meanings in the Hebrew. While it can mean “destruction,” it can also mean “to turn or transform”. When God told Jonah what to say, Jonah and the people of Nineveh heard one thing only: God was going to destroy them. But God had something else in mind. He was going to transform them. He was going to take a great city, known for its cruelty, injustice, and polytheism, and have them bow before Him, changing their behavior in the process.

But wait, doesn't the text clearly say, "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it"? Yes, it does. But that does not mean that God was always aware that they would repent. He knew all along that His word of warning, spoken through Jonah, would have the very effect that it did. It is from our finite perspective as men, that the outcome looks as if it was dictated by the actions of men. They repented, therefore, God spared them. But this would make God far less than sovereign and His will left up to the whims of men. What if they had failed to repent? Would God have been forced to destroy them? Was their future in God's hands or their own? The overarching message of the Bible is that God is in full and complete control. And while that may be hard for us to accept as men, it is the reality of God's character and the nature of the universe He has created. God leaves nothing up to chance. H. L. Ellison explains it this way:

"We may know the character of God only from what he does and the words he uses to explain his actions. When he does not do what he said he would, we as finite men can say only that he has changed his mind or repented, even though we should recognize, as Jonah did, that he had intended or desired this all along." – Ellison, "Jonah," pp. 383-84. Cf. Feinberg, p. 37.

Why would God spare a pagan city like Nineveh? The text doesn't tell us, but it would be easy to assume that God was using the repentance of this immoral, wicked city to shame the people of God. He sent one prophet, and a reluctant one at that, to share a single message of coming destruction. And He sent him to a people who were not His own. And yet, they heard, they listened and the repented. They believed God. It is similar to what God did in the New Testament, when He took His gracious offer of salvation to the Jewish people and they refused to accept it. Instead, they crucified the messenger. So, God took His message to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, and they heard and believed. Paul would later write:

God has appointed me as the apostle to the Gentiles. I stress this, for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them. For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! – Romans 11:13-15 NLT

God was using the Ninevites to shame the Israelites. But He was also showing His sovereign power to save anyone He might so choose. There is no sinner too great that God cannot redeem him.

Unjust Anger

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? 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. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?” – Jonah 4:1-4 ESV

In order to get the full impact of these verses, it’s important to remember what immediately preceded them.

God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. – Jonah 3:10 ESV

God’s message that the Ninevites would be overthrown, delivered through the prophet Jonah, had resulted in their repentance. From the king in his palace to the peasant in the streets, everyone in the city was on their knees before God in a state of mourning. Not only that, but an official royal decree had also gone out commanding every citizen to “turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence” (Jonah 3:8 NLT). And they had. But Jonah was displeased. And that’s putting it mildly. He was angry. In the Hebrew language, the frustration is much more intense. Verse one of chapter four could actually be translated, “It was evil to Jonah, a great evil.” He saw what God had just done as not just wrong, but evil. And the result was anger and frustration – with God. Again, the Hebrew word translated as “angry” is much more intense. It is *charah* and it literally means, “to be hot, furious, burn.” Jonah was incensed. He was boiling over with rage and it was directed at God. So, he decided to call God out – in prayer.

“Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish!” – Jonah 4:2 NLT

So, now the truth comes out. For the first time, Jonah shares the true reason for his refusal to obey God’s initial commission to go to Nineveh. He feared they might repent. This is fascinating. It wasn’t that he feared they might kill him for bringing them a message of pending destruction from a God they didn’t even worship. It wasn’t that he feared rejection. He feared the people might repent. And he feared that God might spare them. Why? Because he knew God.

“I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people.” – Jonah 4:2 NLT

What an amazing acknowledgement. Jonah knew his God well. And he knew his Israelite history well. What he says is almost a direct quote from the book of Exodus. Moses had returned to the mountain with a second set of stone tablets to receive God’s law again. This was after Moses had smashed the original set after having come down off the mountain the first time to find the

people worshiping a golden calf. So just before engraving His law one more time, God called out to Moses:

“Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin.” – Exodus 34:6-7 NLT

God had spared the people of Israel, in spite of their rebellion against Him. Before Moses had even had a chance to give them God’s laws, they had turned away from Him and decided to worship a false god made from the gold and silver God had provided for them when they had left Egypt. Jonah knew the story. And he knew that God was compassionate and merciful. He knew God’s reputation for forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin. And his greatest fear had been that God would do just that for the people of Nineveh, who Jonah hated with a passion. And Jonah explains to God that his original plan to flee to Tarshish had been an attempt to keep what he feared from happening. He had preferred to disobey God than risk the chance of God forgiving and sparing the Ninevites. The thought of that happening had been more than he could bear.

But it’s interesting to note that God had spared and forgiven Jonah for his iniquity, rebellion and sin. He had saved Jonah’s life from death by drowning by providing a large fish to swallow him. Then, three days later, God had miraculously caused that fish to vomit Jonah up on the dry land. If you recall Jonah’s prayer, offered up to God from the belly of the fish, he was counting on God’s mercy and compassion.

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me...” – Jonah 2:2 ESV

“I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit...” – Jonah 2:6 ESV

“When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.” – Jonah 2:7 ESV

“Salvation belongs to the Lord!” – Jonah 2:9 ESV

Jonah had been more than willing to accept the mercy and compassion of God for himself, but he refused to allow God to do the same thing for the people of Nineveh. Somehow, Jonah felt their sins were worse and their destruction much more deserving than anything he had done. But at a time when Jonah should have been kneeling before God in awe and wonder at what had just happened in the city of Nineveh, he is accusing God of evil. He is shaking his fist in the face of Almighty God and questioning His wisdom and integrity. Now, it’s important to note that Jonah’s anger was partially a result of his intense nationalistic fervor. He was a loyal Israelite. And he would probably have been aware that the prophets Hosea and Amos had both predicted that God was going to use the Assyrians to bring judgment on Israel.

They [Israel] shall not remain in the land of the Lord, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria. – Hosea 9:3 ESV

They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. – Hosea 11:5 ESV

“I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts. – Amos 5:27 ESV

Jonah most likely thought that if he refused to go to Nineveh, there would be no chance of them repenting and God sparing them. And because they were vile and wicked sinners, God would be forced to destroy them. That way, there would be no Assyrians to fulfill the prophecies of Amos and Hosea. Jonah had thought he could somehow force God’s hand and halt the pending destruction of Israel. But the sad reality was, the people of Israel would fail to heed the warnings of Hosea or Amos. But the Assyrians living in the capital city of Nineveh, would hear God and believe. They would repent. And God would eventually use them to conquer rebellious Israel and take them into captivity.

Jonah knew that God was merciful and compassionate. He was well aware that God was slow to anger. But he just seemed to have a difficult time with the concept of God’s sovereignty. Jonah found it hard to understand that God was going to do what He wanted to do, whether Jonah agreed with it or not. God didn’t need his input or help. Jonah couldn’t fathom why God would spare the very people who had been prophesied to be the future source of Israel’s destruction. He failed to trust God and His bigger plan for His people. So, he asked God to kill him.

*“Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”
– Jonah 4:3 NLT*

In other words, Jonah tells God that he would rather be dead if God is not going to destroy the Assyrians. This took a lot of guts on Jonah’s part. And I think it reveals just how upset he really was. Jonah is not bluffing. He had already tried to take his own life once before, when he had the sailors toss him overboard in the midst of a raging storm. This time, He asks God to do it. He wants God to kill him. And I find it somewhat surprising that God didn’t take him up on his offer. After all, his insubordination and disrespect for God are off the charts. God would have been fully justified in taking Jonah up on his offer. But instead, God simply asks Jonah a question:

“Is it right for you to be angry about this?” – Jonah 4:4 NLT

God asks Jonah if his anger was truly justified. Did he have a good reason to literally burn with anger at God? Was he just in calling what God had done, evil? In essence, this is a rhetorical question from God. Jonah had no right at all. He had no clue as to what God was doing and why He was doing it. God had a perfectly good reason for sparing the Ninevites, whether Jonah

understood it or liked it. His problem was with accepting the will of God. The apostle Paul would deal with this very same issue centuries later.

Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, "Why have you made me like this?" When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. – Romans 9:20-22 NLT

The prophet, Daniel, spoke very similar words regarding the sovereign will and right of God to do as He pleases in the world which He has created.

"All the people of the earth are nothing compared to him. He does as he pleases among the angels of heaven and among the people of the earth. No one can stop him or say to him, 'What do you mean by doing these things?'" – Daniel 4:35 NLT

Jonah's beef was with God. While he knew much about God, He didn't know what God was up to. From his limited human perspective, none of this made sense. But rather than shake his fist in the face of God, he should have kneeled in awe and wonder at the mystery of God's way. Jonah could have used the wise words of Paul about now.

Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the Lord's thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice? And who has given him so much that he needs to pay it back? For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen. – Romans 11:33-36 NLT

A Dead Plant and a Dead Heart

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" – Jonah 4:5-11 ESV

Having spoken his mind with God, Jonah left the city and made himself a temporary lean-to under which he could rest. But he also anticipated being able to watch something happen back in the city. The text says that he wanted to “see what would become of the city” (Jonah 4:65 ESV). Perhaps Jonah believed that he had persuaded God to change His mind and destroy the city after all, because God had not taken him up on his request to kill him. Jonah was still alive and so he probably had hopes that their destruction might still come true. Or he could have been waiting to see if the Ninevites’ repentance would run its course and they would for right back to their evil ways. If that happened, he probably assumed God would either destroy them or send him back with another message of impending doom. Either way, Jonah was wanting to see God bring down His wrath on the people of Nineveh. But as before, Jonah was to learn some things about the God he thought he knew so well.

God created a plant to grow up around Jonah’s little shelter, to provide him with shade from the intense heat of the day. In the Hebrew, the word for “plant” is very specific. It refers to a gourd or cucumber-like plant that begins very small but grows very quickly. According to *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, it was “a tall biennial plant, beautiful and quick-growing, with a soft and succulent stalk, a slight injury of which would cause the plant to die.” In what was probably a miraculously short period of time, the plant had grown to such a degree that it provided Jonah with shade and what is described as salvation “from his discomfort.” What is interesting to note is that the word translated “discomfort” is actually the Hebrew word, *ra*, which can be translated, “evil” or “wickedness”. The plant, small and insignificant as it started out to be, had become a source of God-ordained salvation from wickedness for Jonah. This point should not be overlooked. This was going to be part of God’s divine lesson for the stubborn, hate-filled prophet.

But what was the wickedness or evil from which the plant rescued Jonah? His own anger and hate. Jonah despised the Ninevites. He had from the very beginning and I believe it was for this

very reason that God called Jonah to be the one to take the message to them. God knew full well the condition of Jonah's heart when He commissioned him. He was aware of Jonah's feelings for the people of Nineveh and the nation of Assyria in general. And it is just like God to take someone like Jonah and make him the messenger to a people he can't stand. In a similar way, God took Paul, who had begun his career as a persecutor of the followers of Christ and made him the primary messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul had been a faithful Jew committed to the Hebrew faith and commissioned by the high priest to hunt down and arrest Christians. But God would convert Paul and recommission him, giving him a new job to perform: Taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike. God saved Paul from his wickedness and gave him a new heart and a new mission in life.

So, God sent the plant for Jonah, and he was very glad. But Jonah's pleasure was based on his relief from physical discomfort alone. He was happy to have the shade and a break from the scorching heat. But Jonah was still oblivious to his real problem: His own evil attitude. Jonah had been guilty of accusing God of evil. Verse one of this chapter tells us of Jonah's anger with God over His sparing of the people of Nineveh, and that verse could actually be translated, "It was evil to Jonah, a great evil." According to Jonah, what God had done was wicked. And yet, God is trying to show Jonah that he is the one with the evil, wicked heart. God's decision to spare Nineveh had left Jonah "exceedingly angry". The arrival of the plant had made Jonah "exceedingly glad". What an interesting and insightful contrast.

And when God sends a worm to attack the plant and destroy it, Jonah loses his shade and his will to live. We're told that "he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live'" (Jonah 4:8 ESV). This would be the third time for Jonah to have a death wish. He had commanded the sailors to throw him overboard in order that he might die. When God had spared the Ninevites, he had asked God to take his life. And once again, he sees death as preferable to living with what he deems as unacceptable conditions. Jonah was a man who didn't like it when things failed to go his way. I don't think Jonah had a death wish, it is just that he had a strong aversion to having his will resisted or his desires fulfilled.

So, God asks him a question that is very similar to one He had asked before: "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" (Jonah 4:9 ESV). The *New Living Translation* puts it this way: "Is it right for you to be angry about this?" He is once again asking Jonah if his anger is justified. Did he have a right to be angry about the plant? And Jonah responded, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die" (Jonah 4:9 ESV). Jonah had lost his shade and he was ready to die because of it. I would say that is a bit of an overreaction. Yes, he was suffering from the scorching wind and sun that God had sent, and he was faint from the experience, but was it enough reason to prefer death over life?

And God cuts to the chase, exposing Jonah's real problem. He says, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly" (Jonah 4:10 NLT). Most likely, Jonah had been staring at the withered plant, his former protector from the sun, and was troubled with its demise. He lamented its untimely destruction. And God reveals to Jonah the absurdity of his emotions. Jonah was more upset over a dead plant than he would

have been about the destruction of hundreds of thousands of people. He would have rejoiced at their deaths, but he mourned over the withering of a simple plant. And God puts it all in perspective for Jonah, telling him:

“But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?” – Jonah 4:11 NLT

God confronted Jonah about the condition of his evil heart. He had no compassion for the people of Nineveh. In fact, Jonah didn’t even care about all the livestock within the walls of the city that would have died as a result of any destruction God had brought. It is as if God was saying, “You didn’t care about the people of Nineveh, but couldn’t you have at least asked for the livestock to be spared?” No, Jonah wanted everyone and everything within the walls of Nineveh destroyed. He wanted the entire city wiped out. He had no pity, mercy, or love for them. But God did. The people of Nineveh didn’t know their right hand from their left. In other words, they were morally ignorant. They were not the people of God. They didn’t know any better. They had not been given the laws of God. They had no Levitical priesthood or sacrificial system. They were pagans who were ignorant of the ways of God, and yet, they had believed God and repented of their wickedness. And God had showed them mercy.

Jonah had been willing to weep over the death of a plant, but had no problem wishing for the deaths of more than 100,000 people. He had a wrong perspective. He had a wicked and evil heart. He was not seeing things as God does. And yet, Jonah was the one who had admitted that God was “a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people” (Jonah 4:2 NLT). Jonah just wanted to be the one to decide who would be the beneficiaries of God’s mercy, compassion and kindness. He wanted to be the one who determined who got saved and who got destroyed. But that was God’s job. It was God who had told Moses, “For I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose” (Exodus 33:19 NLT). And the apostle Paul would quote from that very same passage, when he wrote, “For God said to Moses, ‘I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.’ So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it” (Romans 9:15-16 NLT). It is up to God to decide who will receive His mercy. It is not earned or deserved. Jonah had done nothing to deserve the plant that had provided him with shade. In fact, what he had deserved was the wrath of God for his rebellion, insubordination and accusations of evil against God. But God had shown Him mercy. And God had shown mercy to the undeserving people of Nineveh.

The real message of the book of Jonah is not the repentance of the people of Nineveh. That was really an object lesson for Jonah and the people of Israel. They had been reluctant to listen to the prophets of God, refusing their warnings of coming destruction and calls to repentance. And yet, the wicked Assyrians, including their king, had heard the message of God, repented of their wickedness and mourned before Him in sorrow and fear. The people of Israel were no less deserving of God’s judgment, but they somehow felt they were immune from destruction. They were God’s chosen people. But God will show mercy on whom He will show mercy. He will

spare those whom He chooses to spare. What He is looking for are repentant, broken hearts. As the great king, David, wrote after his sin with Bathsheba:

“The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.” – Psalm 51:17 NLT