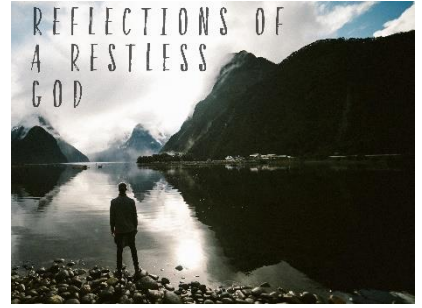


## Imagine That? Jonah, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: Jonah [selected]

8-28-16



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### Reflection Questions

*“How do you run from God? Sleep? 5-hour energy? Shopping spree? How many times in your life have you checked Travelocity for a one-way ticket to Tarshish? Where is your Tarshish? Is it a more exotic job or a new spouse who ‘really gets you’ or some new mailing address? To where or what or whom are you running to avoid God? Avoid yourself?”*

*“How do you measure grace? Would you say it’s more indiscriminate or calculated? How do you decide? How do you want it measured out to you? Who in your life could use a healthy dose of grace even though they don’t deserve it? How lovely would it be coming from you?”*

*“Have you ever had one of those, ‘Let’s try this again’, moments? How did you get there? What was your response? Did it forge a new direction for you or simply make you more resolute in your stubbornness?”*

*“Is it right for you to champion and celebrate a grace in your own life that you are unwilling to make available to another? Is it just to take up your ‘front row seat’ in another’s demise, just so you can be proven right? Would you rather be right, or compassionate?”*

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### Teaching Notes

We usually arrive at God, not by getting it all right, but mostly by getting it wrong (wrong assumptions, wrong values, wrong pursuits... the wrong way). One author put it this way, *“In the school of faith, first we fail the test and then we learn the lesson.”*

*“There is a way that seems right, to man, but in the end, it leads to destruction”* (Proverbs 14:12).

Jonah 1:1-3 [read]

At first glance, this story seems better suited for a flannel-graph than it does for any serious theological conversation. It’s a story that is almost comical in its absurdity, but one that confronts some deeply spiritual issues in our lives, such as surrender and compassion and our posture toward an unbelieving and “uncooperative” culture.

Jonah was living out of a 'well-worn' paradigm that made certain assumptions as to how the world worked.

- God rewards good behavior with blessing
- Suffering is a definitive marker of God's displeasure
- Grace is free... for those who have earned it (see assumption #1)
- Children don't starve to death, marriages don't dissolve, wisdom comes with age, "cheaters never prosper", "*Mean People Suck!*" He can't resolve it. There seems to be no congruence.

Jonah does what we all tend to do: he projects the unloving responses of his own heart onto God in order to somehow justify his disobedience, then becomes resentful toward God for not endorsing his assumptions.

As re-read the story, again, I'm not so much struck by the need to defend the improbable. I've already conceded in my own heart and head that if God is really who he says he is, then the story could have said that Jonah was swallowed by a guppy, and I'm still in!

At this point in the narrative, we don't know why Jonah disobeys, all we know is that this is the moment that Jonah has been dreaming of for years. Jonah hates the Ninevites. They were an ominous super-power which made an art-form out of human torture and suffering (designed the first 'yard ornaments' out of body parts).

They were morally reprehensible and seemingly stood for everything that Jonah despised and believed to be at odds with the covenant God of Israel. He assumed that God hated them, too.

This is the "queen mother" of all "*I know something you don't know's*" (this is getting to deliver the news to your brother that your parents are taking away his keys for a month). Yet, when he gets the 'go ahead', he Googles the furthest place on the map and sets sail.

Here it is: Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh, not for fear that he may be rejected, but that he may be welcomed. Not that he might be proven wrong, but that God will be proven right.

**There are at least (3) sure indicators from this story that our faith is disintegrating:**

- 1. When obedience becomes optional.**
- 2. When human distress becomes unnoticeable.**
- 3. When grace becomes unavailable.**

**When obedience becomes optional.**

Let me not spend a great deal of time on this except to say: know that any time that we choose to avoid God, there will always be a ship sailing to Tarshish.

The world will always present a lengthy menu of options for satisfying our flesh (e.g. ladies, if you are lonely and curious, there will always be your "ideal mate" awaiting you on the dating site 'du jour'. Guys, when you are ready to indulge your fantasy, there will always be some form of media to satisfy your craving.

### **When human distress becomes unnoticeable.**

*“Get up and call on your god”.* The signals and symptoms are everywhere (saying in the Fire/EMS services: *“If I’m running, you should be running too!”*) But, he’s asleep. Got my ear-buds on. I’m face down in my notebook. I’ve got my own issues. Not my problem.

What the captain of the ship really wanted to know was, *“Does your God care? Is he any different than our God? Is he aware? Can he help?”* It is most often less explicit in our interactions, but with the same underlying angst: *“Does your God care? Do you care?”*

### **When grace becomes unavailable.**

Jonah was ‘irked’ because he discovers that grace is irrational and not sequential. It doesn’t fit neatly into our moral spreadsheet. We naturally resist grace because it’s an affront to our own presumed goodness. It says that all of our efforts at redeeming ourselves have no place in God’s economy.

We don’t want to acknowledge grace because we don’t think we need it. We don’t want to offer grace because we think they don’t deserve it.

Jonah is suffering from a condition that is unique to the religious: ***“self-righteousness”***. It’s rightness “on the curve”. I don’t have to be like God, just better than you!

It sounds like this: *“Sure, I’ve got some issues, but at least I’ve never \_\_\_\_\_”*. This should send warning flares into your soul! We see ourselves as basically good people, with a few bad habits, and “those people” as desperately wicked and godless, in need of retro-fitting.

I noticed, on this pass through Jonah, the interesting way of describing Jonah’s response. *“flees from the presence of the LORD”* (Heb. *‘face’*) In our earliest development, it is the face that represents to us the affirmation and availability of the one in whose image we are growing. We come to understand who we are by looking into the face of our mother and father.

Jonah can’t bear to look into the face of God because what he sees in himself is not a healthy reflection of who he was created to be, nor who God really is.

### **Jonah is actually even “uglier” and less appealing in his obedience than his disobedience.**

He was accommodating and compliant and dutiful and just not fun to be around. At the very least, there is an honesty about our disobedience which actually increases our chances of eventually responding to grace. Obedience can actually harden us to God in a way that even disobedience won’t.

Jonah 1:17-2:1 [read]

### **The belly of the big fish is the incubator of grace in our lives.**

Imagine, three days, macerating in big-fish digestive juices and, even worse, no cell service or wifi? Jonah, alone with himself, alone with his God.

- Throughout the book, there has been a verb used repeatedly which means *“to prepare; to appoint; to provide”* (fish, vine, wind, worm).

The belly of the big fish is the place of divine-confinement. Jonah is sequestered by God.

They are places of intense darkness and inexplicable clarity. It's the place where God hems us in and confronts us, not simply with our own frailty and brokenness, but the restorative love that awaits us there! It's not a "trap", it's a design, a device for our restoration.

Jonah 2:10-3:5 [read]

You've got to love this scene: Jonah, on the beach, head wrapped in seaweed, lying in a tepid pool of big fish puke and wreaking of sushi and God says, "*Let's try this again!*"

Jonah 3:10-4:5 [read]

*"Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed"*. In the Hebrew, (5) words. (5) of the most succinct least compassionate words any prophet has ever spoken. It was the epitome of *"truth without love"* (Ephesians 1).

### **Jonah loves God but he doesn't love Nineveh.**

He will not be permitted to simply update his blog post with some impersonal directive, but he will be called upon to enter into their world: to engage them in their pain, to eat their food, to observe their cultural practices, to watch their frantic pursuits of life and fulfillment as people who *"can't tell their left hand from their right hand"* (4:11).

Love is never nameless and faceless. Love always involves a specific time in history (date on a calendar) and a spot on the map to help ensure that love is not simply conceptual, but practical... incarnational.

God says, *"Jonah, you're concerned about all the wrong stuff. Your vision's too limited. You're heart's too small. I'm concerned about the ones that don't look like you, that don't live in your neighborhood, who don't share your zip code, who don't listen to your Spotify playlist, who don't go in the same bathrooms you do, who don't tow the same party. My kingdom, my will, my earth, my people, my dream... for your good!"*

Despite our misunderstandings of sovereignty, God does not always get what God wants. Yes, he is able to accomplish his ultimate purposes--- despite our resistance--- but is not interested at accomplishing them at our expense. He wants others to experience him through our experience of him.

### **Gospelled...**

*"So as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights"* (Matthew 12:40)

Jonah goes outside the city to condemn it. Jesus, another prophet, goes outside the city to restore it. Jonah goes outside the city, which spared his life, in hopes that it would be condemned; Jesus is forcefully taken outside the city, which would take his life, in order to recover it.

Confinement turns to freedom. Despair into hope. Death into resurrection. It's the good news.