

# Jonah's Journey



## **Introductions**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai (Jonah1:1)

We're going to spend a little while on the book of Jonah.

There is much controversy over this book: Did Jonah really get swallowed by a fish and live to tell the tale? Did Nineveh really respond in a city-wide act of repentance? Is there really a fish that could swallow someone and spit them up later? Shouldn't we just treat this story as an allegorical satire? But then why does Jesus parallel His three days in the tomb to Jonah's time in the whale's belly thus lending factuality to the story?

Let me say at the outset that I am perfectly comfortable to believe that the God who created the entire universe and who raised His Son from the dead is completely capable of providing a fishy submarine for a stubborn prophet.

I think the debates about whether Jonah is allegory or fact miss the point entirely. The bottom line is that there are great truths conveyed by the account - and these truths are bigger than Jonah, the fish or Nineveh. I'm going to deal with the text as it stands and take it at face value. This, I think, was the author's intention.

Jonah, son of Amittai lived in the 8th Century BC. He is acknowledged briefly in 2Kings14:25 as one who spoke the word of the Lord. However, the vocabulary, language and idiom of the finished book of Jonah comes from a much more modern time - roughly the end of the 4th century BC - some 400 years later.

We don't know who the author of the book is. The book bears Jonah's name because he is the chief character, not because he is the author. The writing is concise, sharp and satirical. Jonah is the main character, but he is not the hero - he's the object of examination and there's a great deal of fun being poked at him. Judging from the linguistic clues mentioned earlier, we can conclude that the book is about Jonah and was written at a time where it was felt that readers could learn lessons from Jonah's mistakes and also get to meet Jonah's God.

At the end of the day, the main character isn't Jonah, but God. Jonah is, in many ways, a foil for God - Jonah's mistakes and misconceptions show God in a clearer light.

There is a lot of humour in the book and this too is a beautiful picture of the playfulness of God that is in no way callous or unkind, but desperate to break through our calcified preconceptions. I'm looking forward to Jonah's journey...

(The image above is modified from one I found on the [www.reliancechurch.org](http://www.reliancechurch.org) )

## **Receiving the Word**

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." (Jonah1:1-2)

Jonah had heard the word of the Lord before.

In fact, the last time he heard God's voice, it was a promise that Israel's boundaries would be extended and this prophecy was fulfilled by king Jeroboam.

And so Jonah had been distinguished as a true prophet. His prophecies had come true. His prophetic authority had been validated. It opened the door for God to speak to Jonah again...

It continues to be a wonderful thing that God speaks to and through His people. God guides and leads people in unfolding His plan in the world and we have the amazing privilege of being His co-workers.

But Jonah rebelled against this instruction from God.

One has to wonder why:

Had past success had hardened Jonah's heart with arrogant pride?

Or did Jonah have a problem with Nineveh?

Nineveh was some 500 miles from Jonah's home town. It was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians would later destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721BC and fall to the Babylonians in 612BC. The prophet Nahum prophesies the ultimate destruction of the Assyrians and Nineveh. Nineveh represented power and oppression. It was the home of the enemy.

And now Jonah was to go there. And, judging by his past success, he might be successful again. And if he was successful in his preaching, then Nineveh (a city full of uncircumcised heathens) might repent.

Jonah didn't want that.

- He didn't want to leave the comfort of his home town and go among the "heathens" in Nineveh.
- He didn't want to be associated with the gentiles.
- He didn't want his preaching to succeed and bring them to repentance.

And so he heard, but didn't listen...

God's word still comes to us today - and sometimes it will take us out of our comfort zones... We will have to make decisions...

## **Refusal with attitude**

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. (Jonah 1:3)

I am amazed at this verse.

If Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, surely all he had to do was ignore God's message? But Jonah doesn't only reject the message, he rejects the Giver of the message. If God is a God who might include the Gentiles in His mercy then Jonah wanted nothing to do with Him!

Let's look at the passage:

- Twice we're told that he wants to escape God: "Jonah ran away from the Lord" and that he had decided to "flee from the Lord."
- Tarshish is as far West from Palestine as Nineveh is East from Palestine. "Tarshish" was also known as the place "*where God is not.*"
- He boards a ship. The Israelites were not a sea-faring nation. The Old Testament speaks of Leviathan, the sea monster of the deep. The Sea of Galilee was the limit of their sea-adventurers. The Mediterranean was too big and scary.
- He pays for his fare.

These actions are quite a statement of rejection and evidence of fairly significant tantrum or prophetic pout. "If that's the kind of God You are then I am not only going to ignore you, but I'm going to head in the opposite direction, even when that's way out of my comfort zone and even if I have to pay good money to go that way."

When we put God in a box which carefully defines what He can and can't do, we can expect that He will break out of that box. And God almost always confounds our boxes with the

unexpectedness and magnitude His mercy. ("How can God forgive him/her?") This creates a crisis for us and our typical reaction is similar to Jonah's. We stop going to church. We don't read our Bibles. We rebel.

Maybe Jonah had reason to hate the Assyrian Ninevites. Maybe they had killed someone important to him. Whatever it was, Jonah couldn't stomach the idea of God being merciful to them. He not only ignores the message. He rebels against the Message-Giver.

In 1956 Jim Elliot went as a missionary to the Auca tribe in South America. Shortly afterward he was murdered by the people he had come to share God's love with. A few years later his widow, Elizabeth, stunned the world when she went to live among people who had murdered her husband. She spent years in their midst proclaiming the love and forgiveness of God.

Jonah headed for Tarshish...

I wonder who we are more like, Jonah or Elizabeth Elliot?

## **Depressed Denial**

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. 6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish." (Jonah 1:4-6)

So Jonah is rebelling, but God wants to get his attention.

The storm is so violent that even the seasoned sailors are afraid. They're crying out to their gods, *but Jonah is sleeping.*

Some people have suggested that depression can be anger without energy. We lock up our feelings in a box and the box gets heavier and heavier to carry around until we withdraw and retreat into sleep and inactivity to avoid the elephant in the room.

This is what Jonah is doing here. He is a prophet of the most high God. Sailors were considered unspiritual and heathen... but they are praying, and Jonah, who is best qualified to pray, is sleeping... and hiding...

The captain's amazement makes it clear that Jonah's behaviour is unusual and bizarre. Hundreds of years later, frightened disciples would wake Jesus who also slept in the storm. But Jesus isn't suffering from depressed denial - He's not hiding from God - He is secure in the love and protection of the Father - He is in God's will and following God's plan.

Storms come.

Sometimes they frighten us and cause us to pray.

Sometimes we sleep because we are utterly secure in God's love.

Sometimes we sleep because we are angry and upset and don't want to face our challenges.

Jonah's anger has led him to go in the opposite direction of what he was called to. In his disillusionment he is heading for the place where "God is not." And now in ongoing denial he sleeps - ignoring the danger the storm holds - both for him and the others on the boat.

If you see something of yourself in Jonah today, don't stay isolated like he did. Reach out, talk to a wise counsellor, get help. You'll be glad you did.

## **Faulty Logic**

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away

from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) (Jonah1:7-10)

When we are disillusioned or angry with God we often have a breakdown of common sense...

Jonah boarded the ship telling the sailors that he was running away from God. The storm comes and the seasoned sailors are scared enough to pray, but Jonah is sticking his head in the soil of his pillow. When they cast lots to find out who was "responsible for the calamity" - the lot falls to Jonah.

When the sailors quiz Jonah about his background, he answers: "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

This is the "Duh!?! " moment in the story...

If your God is the God of heaven who made the sea and the land, *then how on earth (pun intended) do you run away from Him?*

Jonah has had a very obvious logic breakdown.

The sailors get it - they are terrified - they see God's power in the storm and they are very aware of Jonah's incredible hubris. Not only is his thinking process illogical and arrogant, but his selfish actions impact those around him.

The sailors are "terrified with a great terror" (this is what the original Hebrew says) and the word for "terror" spans the linguistic breadth of *primal terror* on one side and *awe-filled-reverence* on the other. It seems the sailors, who we would look down on as a 'rough crowd', are more theologically astute than Jonah.

But it happens to us too...

Sometimes we get so tangled up in our own inner angst, pride and stubbornness that we do these illogical things. We try to "punish God" by not going to church, when He's already gone to the cross for us. We stop praying and reading our Bibles because we're mad at Him, but the sun still rises and our hearts still beat - all because He holds us in His hands.

## **Pious Sailors - Pouting Prophet**

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. 14 Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." 15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. (Jonah1:11-16)

Jonah's track record is pretty dismal thus far...

God calls, Jonah runs.

God warns, Jonah hides in bed.

And now when the sailors cast lots and Jonah is identified clearly as being the one that God is looking for, Jonah's spiteful rebellion reaches it's peak: "Throw me into the sea."

Jonah's not going to repent.

He's not going to submit.

He'd rather take his chances with the big angry sea.

Rather *that* than turning to God!

(Bear in mind that the Israelites were very very very scared of the sea and the monsters that lived in it...)

In contrast the sailors (who we would assume are a cut-throat lot who would happily toss some crazy Jew overboard if it saved their skin) try their very best to avoid this finality. They beg for mercy and as a last resort reluctantly and remorsefully give Jonah what he wants...

When the sea calms, they make sacrifices and vows to God. They don't wait to get to land or fix the boat, they make vows and sacrifices then and there.

It's scary what religious haughtiness and pride can do. It's scary how we can put God in a box and then be furious when He jumps out of that box. Jonah is very bitter over his "god box" which hasn't kept God in line. Although his behaviour seems extreme, it's just a picture of where a god-caging-theology takes us.

Sometimes the raw unsophisticated faith of the sailors is where we need to be...

## **Something Fishy...**

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah1:17)

Some scholars and many sceptics have issues with Jonah's big fish - (The Hebrew word isn't whale, but "big fish"). They question whether this is feasible or not, they argue that it is unlikely and they point to the satirical nature of the writing and suggest that satire often involves exaggeration and extreme contrasts.

On the other side, more conservatives argue frantically for the existence of the fish. They cite the story of James Bartley who was allegedly swallowed by a whale in the 1890's and was cut out of the stomach three days later, bleached white and blinded by gastric juices. (Some historians question the accuracy of the story...)

Let me go on record as saying I have no problem in believing that the God who created the galaxy and the wonder of DNA is perfectly capable of making it possible for Jonah to be gulped by a large fish. If all the majesty and deity of God's Son could be squeezed into Mary's womb and if death could be conquered by resurrection, then a fishy submarine is no problem for Him.

*But the fish is not the be-all and end-all of the story.*

Jonah's story is about stubborn pride that won't see, even when amazing things happen. We say there are "none so blind as those that will not see." Jonah had the glory of the temple, the amazing depth of theology that saw God as Lord of all, and now the fishmarine that graciously and mercifully takes him back to where he started. But still he does not see.

On the other side is a God who is patient and merciful. God provides the fish and in ch.4 He provides the plant, the worm and the scorching wind. This God would provide a way for Jonah to get back on track. This God would provide a plant to help Jonah understand grace. This God would love Jonah to see His heart.

That's what the fish is actually about.

## **Parallels and Contrasts**

...and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah1:17)

Jesus treats Jonah's time in the big fish's belly literally. In Mt.12:40 He notes: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

This provides a lovely parallel and contrast for us. Jonah spends three days in the fish because of his stubborn pride, racism and rebellion. Jesus, because of His humility, obedience to God and love for us, spends three days in the tomb.

In a similar parallel and contrast Paul loves using the "first Adam" and Jesus as the "second Adam" to create a contrast between human brokenness and Jesus' willing obedience.

We have a similar thing going here. We see our human failures so clearly depicted in Jonah but then Jesus does what Adam and Jonah (and we) didn't do so that we can be saved.

We tell the gospel story by quoting John 3:16:

*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only (willing) Son (to die on the cross) so that whoever believes in Him will not die but have eternal life.*

If there was a Jonah 3:16 it would probably read like this:

*For Jonah so despised the Ninevites that he wasted his one and only life by running away so that they would never hear, believe and turn to God for eternal life.*

But God in His ongoing mercy sends the "fishmarine" to give Jonah another shot...

## **Pious or Pretentious?**

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. 2 He said:

"In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.

From the depths of the grave I called for help,  
and you listened to my cry.

3 You hurled me into the deep,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers  
swept over me.

4 I said, 'I have been banished  
from your sight;  
yet I will look again  
toward your holy temple.'

5 The engulfing waters threatened me,  
the deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
But you brought my life up from the pit,  
O LORD my God.

7 "When my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered you, LORD,  
and my prayer rose to you,  
to your holy temple.

8 "Those who cling to worthless idols  
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving,  
will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.  
Salvation comes from the LORD."

10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah2:1-10)

Today's long reading is Jonah's in-transit prayer.

Some see it as a beautiful pious prayer - that it is Jonah returning to the Lord and thanking Him for His mercy.

Others see the prayer as fake and pretentious. Jonah is spouting religious language (don't forget that he is a prophet) and using phrases that we find in Psalm 40,42,116 and others. But there is no real repentance in this prayer. In fact, if anything, there is a hint of self-righteousness:

"You listened to my cry"

"In my distress I called to the Lord"

"I called for help."

"I remembered You"

"My prayer rose to you"

No, Jonah, you slept and the sailors prayed.

You ran away, you chose the depths instead of submitting to God's will.

And then there's verse 8 - an obvious jab at the Ninevites - just a cheap attempt at justifying his running away: "They cling to their idols and so they don't deserve your mercy..." and so by implication, Jonah absolves himself of wrong-doing.

I think it is very easy for us to let religious phrases roll off our lips when our hearts are not in it. I think we can very easily do the "religiously correct" thing but have our hearts far away.

Is Jonah's prayer pious or pretentious?

When I look at Jonah's behaviour in the next two chapters, there is no sign of the piety that we see in the prayer. His mouth is saying one thing, his life is saying something else.

So I think the prayer is pretentious

What about you?

I think verse 10 provides adequate commentary:

Having heard the prayer God commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land!!!

## **Does God have a sense of humour?**

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.  
(Jonah2:10)

Does God have a sense of humour?

Do you think He shares a laugh with the angels?

Can you imagine Jesus coming to the Father saying "did you hear the one about the man...?"

Have you ever thought about this?

When I consider the poodle, the ostrich and the antics of a troop of monkeys or a litter of kittens then I conclude that God has a sense of humour.

When I consider that we are made in the image of God and I consider how good wholesome laughter is for us then I must conclude that God has a sense of humour.

When I consider the story of Jonah there are copious clues to God's sense of humour:

- Jonah headed for Tarshish ("Where God is not") when he serves the Lord of heaven and earth.
- Rough sailors praying while Jonah is pouting
- The fish "ejecting", "emitting" or "expelling" Jonah after his pretentious prayer as if to say "that's as much pious pretence as I'm willing to put up with!"
- Or what about growing a plant over Jonah's head and then providing a *worm* to munch the plant?!? (See ch.4) Why not just say "the plant died" but now there's a worm and we can almost imagine his naughty face!

We have to read the account of Jonah as God dealing with Jonah with His tongue in His cheek. But at no point is Jonah reduced to being the butt of a series of jokes being made by a callous God who wants to humiliate him... Chapter 4 reveals God's tender concern for the prophet's heart.

Experts in communication and preaching tell us that warm and genuine humour fosters connection between speaker and audience and a good communicator can get us laughing at ourselves.

God is trying to get through to Jonah. He's trying to show him how ridiculous his racism and pompous pretentious piety is. He gives Jonah enough rope to hang himself, but each time Jonah paints himself into a corner God is there giving him another chance.

Does God have a sense of humour? Yes, I believe He does. It's holy humour that doesn't humiliate but the humour that disarms, discombobulates and dis-illusions (brings us to reality). He's at work in us and humour is a gentle tool that gets past our defences so that His love can reach our hearts.

## **Second chances**

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to

Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city--a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." (Jonah3:1-4)

And so, after the fishmarine journey, Jonah lands up back where he began when he took a boat for Tarshish and God re-commissions him: "The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time..."

Let's not read past that too quickly...

"a second time..."

God is patient, gracious and kind - He gives Jonah a second chance.

- Even after Jonah's dubious prayer in the fish's belly...
- Even after his suicidal refusal ("throw me overboard") to bend his knee to God...
- Even after he buried his head in his pillow while the storm raged
- Even after he booked a cabin and bought a ticket to sail to a place where God was not

What have you done that makes you think that you are disqualified from serving God?

How have you slipped up that causes you to believe that God is done with you?

How have you messed up that you think that God cannot possibly use you?

Many of us, like Jonah, are standing on the beach blinking in the bright sunshine after a helter skelter time entangled in the fishy innards of our failure. And we stand there believing that it's all over.

But God's word comes to us:

"I can still use you."

"I still want to use you."

"We can move on from here."

I think of another beach where Jesus walked with a broken Peter...

The God who met Jonah, the God who met Peter, the God who meets you and me is the God who *gives second chances*.

## **Pouting Prophet - Repentant Residents**

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city--a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." 5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. 7 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." (Jonah3:2-9)

In ch.1 we saw the piety of the heathen sailors contrasted to the pouting rebellion of Jonah. Now, here in ch.3, we witness a similar contrast.

This time Jonah isn't running, he's doing what God asked, but not with a very happy heart. When we get to chapter 4 we'll see that he was dreading the thought that God might be merciful and he's angry about being part of that. His message is not gracious or gentle or respectful. (See Col4:6 & 1Pet3:15) He's callous and even vengeful: "In 40 days God is going to zap you!" (He even goes outside the city and waits for the fire and brimstone)

But the Ninevites do something unprecedented - they repent at *a level that the Israelites have never repented!*

- They believe God. (*Even though His messenger has passive aggressive issues.*)
- They fast in sackcloth and ashes - fortify their repentance with action.
- It's not only the superstitious rabble who believe, but even the king responds

- They formalise it through legislation - they take concrete steps.

God speaks to us about the junk in our lives... When He does, how do you react? May we be more like the Ninevites:

1. That we take God's message seriously regardless of the messenger.
2. That we don't just feel a pang of guilt and then move on, but that we actually mark the moment by taking a concrete action that cements our desire to change.
3. We don't keep it in one corner of our lives, but involve those in our lives who are touched by the issue we are wrestling with.
4. That we make ourselves accountable by putting change-processes in place and making them known.

I believe powerful change could happen in our lives if we did this.

## **He did**

*"Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."*

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (Jonah3:9-10)

The kings and nobles of Nineveh ask a significant question:

*"Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."*

The answer is: They found out and so did we, that God did relent and God **compassionately turned from wrath to give us life**.

Again and again this is the stunning message of the scriptures.

This is the essence of the gospel.

God offers compassionate mercy to all who would receive it.

Even to Ninevites, the hated enemy of the Israelites (and Jonah especially).

To the people we least expect - to all without bias or favour.

All that we have to do is ask.

We know the New Testament version of this passage so well:

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

What is God like?

He's eager to heal and restore all who earnestly seek Him.

He's so eager that compassion trumps wrath and the God's Son dies in our place for love.

And we can be healed.

Let's celebrate God's love and compassion in church on Sunday.

## **True words spoken in anger**

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah4:1-3)

Sometimes, when we are angry, deep truths bubble up out of us.

Jonah is angry. Unspeakably angry. We might say Jonah is having a "vloermoer" (Afrikaans for floor-beating - imagine a two year old lying on the ground throwing a tantrum.)

"I knew it! I just knew it!!! I knew you were going to be merciful to these @#\$. Ninevites. You bring me all the way to Nineveh to pronounce judgement and I spend three days threatening them with judgement and now you decide to be all merciful. I'm the laughing stock of all the prophets!!"

But in his anger Jonah offers us absolute truth:

GOD is:

- gracious
- and compassionate
- slow to anger
- and abounding in love
- and He relents from sending calamity.

Deep down Jonah has always known that this is what God is like. But he had constructed a religious framework that put God into a box of nationalistic faith - Jonah cherished the idea that God had favourites and that his enemies were therefore God's enemies. When God burst out of the box that Jonah had so carefully constructed, Jonah exploded.

When God breaks the mould of our pet theologies and religious frameworks we also struggle. The deep truth is that God loves radically. His love includes the broken, the unlovely, the different and, to top it all He loves our enemies and the people that hurt us. This messes with Jonah and it messes with you and me...

## **Anger's Autonomy**

But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"...

6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered...

9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." (Jonah4:4)

In the face of amazing grace, Jonah is angry.

Not a little ticked off, but deep down angry.

He is furious and feels he has a right to it.

Maybe he feels his anger is justified:

- Maybe people from Nineveh had hurt him personally.
- Maybe his identity consisted of a theology where God was not to be messed with.
- Maybe justice is a big deal in his life.

*Sometimes anger can develop a life of its own.*

Anger can run away with itself and become autonomous.

Before we know it anger is driving our whole life.

Look at Jonah.

First he's angry about God sparing Nineveh.

Then he's angry about a vine that grew up overnight and was destroyed by a super-vine-munching-worm.

And he's angry enough to die!!

Even when one looks at Jonah's behaviour in chapter one there is evidence of this festering anger there too. Jonah would rather sleep in his cabin and let the storm wreck the boat, crew and passengers than deal with God. Then he'd rather drown in the ocean than repent.

Anger - it can make us irrational and it can poison our lives.

We don't know why he's angry...

Maybe he also didn't know anymore...

Maybe he'd been angry for so long that it was just there waiting to erupt.

Did he have the right to be angry?

In both cases the answer is "Absolutely not!"

But there he is - stuck in anger's autonomy.

In the next few days we'll see how God deals with him...

(But in the meantime, let's learn from him and recognise how anger can get out of control in us.)

Some have even suggested that depression is just anger deprived of energy and turned inward. Let's ask ourselves whether we are in the grip of anger...)

## **God's patience**

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"  
"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." (Jonah4:5-9)

So Jonah is angry.

God's gracious compassion doesn't touch him - it infuriates him.

He stomps out into the desert to a safe distance, hoping that God will change his mind and do a Sodom and Gomorrah on the city of Nineveh.

If I were God, I'd have lost patience with this selfish prophet - After the storm, the fishmarine and Nineveh's amazing response, Jonah still doesn't get it!

But God persists.

He lovingly provides a vine which provides cool refreshing shade. Jonah is happy about the vine, but the clear impression that one gets is that he considers this his right and prerogative, rather than a blessing to be grateful for.

The next morning Jonah is still there. Still waiting for the fireworks and still unmoved by the gracious provision of shade and so God provides a worm to munch the vine and a hot wind and sun to remind Jonah of how good he had it.

(As an aside... one can't help but notice the humour here. Like the fish distancing himself from Jonah, it's as though the worm is saying "well, if the vine doesn't soften your heart, then maybe you don't deserve it!" There was nobody else in the fish-tummy and no-one else out in the desert so the only way we know all of this is because Jonah spoke about what happened. It would seem he realised his behaviour in retrospect.)

It doesn't take long for Jonah's short-lived happiness to boil over into toxic anger again. Yes, God does send the worm, some wind and sun but it's a gentle incision that reveals Jonah's festering tumour. God isn't giving up on Jonah. He's already reached Nineveh through the angry prophet, now God is desperately trying to reach the angry prophet...

Will it work?

We'll see tomorrow....

## **Abrupt Conclusion**

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah4:9-11)

Jonah's account ends abruptly. We're left hanging in mid-air.

Jonah's still fuming over Nineveh's reprieve, the demise of a vine that should never have grown in the desert anyway and a God who loves outside the box and paints outside the lines.

Do remember as kids we were taught to colour or paint inside the lines? (Maybe Jonah's teachers were too strict and this is where all his issues came from...)

God's love goes outside the lines of race, culture and history.

Jonah doesn't get it.

God's concluding question is one of the most beautiful pictures of the heart of God:

- 120,000 clueless people
- and many cattle as well

*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*

This is the beautiful contrast that Jonah's story offers us:

Jonah wants to colour *inside* the lines of strict kosher Judaism.

God colours *outside* the lines.

Jonah understands the *theology*:

"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

But he doesn't get it in *practice*.

And so God asks: "Should I not be concerned...???"

It's a no-brainer question. And it's left hanging.

We don't know what Jonah answered!!

**But maybe that's the point...**

I mentioned yesterday that the only person who could recount what happened in the fish-belly and in the desert under the vine is Jonah himself. We could only have this story because Jonah told it. The telling of it doesn't leave a flattering picture of Jonah and I can only hope that the "pouting prophet" came to a place of recognising his pride, anger and elitism (it's more than racism) and decided to tell his story - warts and all - as way of shocking stubborn Israelites out of their arrogant pride.

The conclusion leaves the book open-ended because the question still hangs there for us today:

*What do we believe about God's love?*

Jonah's story is a powerful appeal to us to understand that God's love "paints outside the lines" and that grace is available to us all, no matter what we have done.

When we are paralysed by elitist pride, religious arrogance and a terminal "holier-than-thou" attitude, God's question comes to us:

Who are your Ninevites?

Who would you like God to *zap*?

What happens in your soul when you realise that He is concerned about them?

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???

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I hope you've enjoyed the series on Jonah.

October is Missions Month in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and so, starting tomorrow, there are 31 different ministers writing devotions on this theme. I believe it will be an exciting journey.