

Everyone knows the story of Jonah and how he ran from his responsibilities when God told him to preach to the people of Nineveh. In one of the most memorable childhood Bible stories of all, Jonah was swallowed by a big fish as he was trying to escape from God. Jonah was selfish, nationalistic, and physically minded, and he did not want the Ninevites to be saved because they were enemies of his people. Jonah definitely did not agree with God's love as it was being extended to them.

So he ran from the Lord and headed to Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. He sailed out, but the Lord sent a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Jonah confessed that this problem was his fault, and convinced the crew to throw him overboard. When this was done, the storm was stilled, and the sailors were all in awe of the power of God.

As for Jonah, the Lord prepared a big fish to swallow him. Spending three days and nights in the belly of this fish certainly changed Jonah's desire to obey God, and he prayed earnestly for deliverance. He was then spit out in a most unpleasant way, and God commanded him again to go preach to the Ninevites. This time he obeyed God and preached in that city in such a way that triggered their repentance. He accomplished this in spite of the size of the city, the wickedness of the people, and the fact that he didn't really want to be effective. This is a great example of how God gives the increase.

But Jonah still did not agree with God. His obedience was outward only. His heart was totally out of line with God's; it was looking in the exact opposite direction. He didn't really care what God wanted; he wanted everything to go his own way. Jonah, as we have discovered, was not the ideal prophet. In Jonah 4:1-5 we read: *"But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 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. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'"*

He hoped with all of his might that God would still destroy the city, and set himself up a booth on a hill nearby in hopes of watching a great show. But when God saw how the people of Nineveh truly humbled themselves and turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. God tried to teach Jonah a lesson here, but it clearly had no effect.

We must agree with God and the principles that make up His character (His Goodness) if we are to be pleasing to Him. If we truly agree with God, then we obey; not because we are like Jonah, but because we know it is the best thing, the right thing, to do. True obedience is being like God, it is as simple as that! I don't think that we can put our whole effort into obedience unless we really agree with it in our hearts. And the more we become like God, the easier the obedience is to maintain.

Jonah's story can really be put into perspective if we think about ourselves in the same position as the Ninevites. What if Christ, like Jonah, was forced to go to earth and preach to us against His will? What if He had no love for us and did not want us to be saved? What if He grudgingly obeyed but even now waits up in heaven hoping that God will still send us to hell? How terrible that would be!

We are so fortunate that He does not have that attitude. He loves us and willingly gave Himself up for us. He treats us as friends if we follow Him. And He longs to gather us into His arms to lavish His love on us, if we are but willing to let Him.

Love for our enemies is one of the hardest things to keep in our hearts. Christ showed us the way when he said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" to those of us who were causing his death. And He died for us while "we were yet enemies."

Erich Fromm states that Jonah was a man with a strong sense of order and law, but without love. In his attempt to escape, he found himself in the belly of the whale, which symbolized the state of isolation and imprisonment which his lack of love and solidarity had brought upon him. How much are we like Jonah? Are we as reluctant to forgive our brother as he was? How much love do we feel for our enemies? Would we want them to be lost eternally just to satisfy our personal pleasures?

Christ was not at all reluctant to come to save us, even though it meant great pain and separation. We must strive for the same openness of heart, not allowing ourselves to be trapped like Jonah, but loving each other and wanting all men to be saved.

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