Jonah: The Lies that Rob Us

by Bayless Conley

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Hello friend, thank you for joining me. We are doing a study from the book of Jonah, and for me, it has been fascinating, liberating, and I just feel like it's this gold mine. We just keep getting more and more gold out of it. Let me back up a tiny bit just to bring you up to where we are.

Jonah, most of you probably are somewhat familiar with the story, has been told by God to go preach to Nineveh. He does not want to do it. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. They're the sworn enemies of Israel. Jonah admits later on, “If I go preach to them, they're liable to repent, and God's going to have mercy on them. I don't want that to happen.”

So, he gets on a boat to head to Tarshish, modern-day Spain, as far away as you could get in the then known world from the capital of Assyria. He's just thinking, “I'm not going to preach to them. They're not going to hear the message. God is going to destroy them, and that's what I want to happen.”

Anyway, as Jonah's out there, a great storm arises, and God sent the storm because He's interested in those multiple thousands of Assyrians, as wicked as they were. But the Scripture says that wickedness had come up before God. Judgment was coming, but God wants to give them another chance to repent.

So, the storm coming to Jonah was a mercy for Jonah because he was leaving the will of God. He was headed as far away as he could go from the will of God. That's not a safe place to be. The safest place for you to be is in the middle of God's will. So, it was a mercy to Jonah, and certainly a mercy to the capital city of Assyria, Nineveh.

So, Jonah gets thrown overboard by the guys. He's in the belly of the great fish three days and three nights. It says, “Then he prayed.” He's so stubborn. First of all, he said, “Throw me over. The storm is going to cease.” Jonah didn't know God had prepared a great fish to swallow him. That was a mercy of God. Jonah thought he was going to die. “They throw me in. We’re way too far out in the sea. I can't swim to land. I'm going to die. I'd rather die than see those Assyrians receive mercy from God.” He was so bitter and so angry toward them.

Then the fish swallows him. He's in there for three days and three nights before he will even pray. He was clinging so tightly to his hatred and bitterness toward these Assyrians that it took three days before he would even pray. But when he prays, it's astonishing. He wasn't comfortable in that fish. He describes it as an *affliction*, which means “to be tied up, to be cramped, to be confined.” He says, “From the belly of Sheol, from the belly of hell, I cried. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. It was not fun. I went down to the moorings of the mountains.” Then, when he finally prays, he says this in part of his prayer, Jonah 2:4–5 NKJV,

> 4 “I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’”

Now, this is his prayer that he prayed from inside the great fish. He said,

> 5 “The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head.”

Now, Jonah, after three days, is finally praying, and his prayer is filled with the Word of God. The things I just read to you are actually both quotes from the book of Psalms. Jonah was praying the Word of God. In the second part of verse 4, he actually quotes something that King Solomon had said.

When Solomon had finished building the temple, he prayed before all of the people. It was an inspired prayer. Every Jew looked upon it as a revelation from God, which it was. Solomon said, “God, if anyone gets into trouble because of their own sin and their own wrongdoing, if they will look again toward Your holy temple, then hear from heaven and bring deliverance to them.”

It was a God-inspired prayer. He went on and said, “If there's pestilence, if there's drought, if there's sickness, if we're defeated by our enemies, if we will turn toward Your holy temple, get our hearts right with You and look again toward the holy temple,” which was the symbol of God's presence. “If we look again toward God and pray, then God, You will hear, and You will bring deliverance.”

He even went so far as to say, “If we have been taken captive by our enemies because of our own foolishness, because of our sin—in the land of our captivity, if we will pray and look again toward Your holy temple,” in other words, I'm looking to God. I'm turning my heart to God. I'm making things right between me and God. “Then God, You will hear, and You will intervene.” Again, this is a revelation.

So, Jonah, at this point, is getting his heart right with God. He knows that God is hearing him because Solomon said in that inspired prayer, “God, if we'll look again toward the holy temple and pray, then You will hear from heaven. You will bring deliverance. You will stretch out Your hand, and You will bring help.”

So, Jonah knows. He said, “My prayer entered Your temple.” How do you know, Jonah? “Because the Scripture says God would hear if I did this.” Jonah did what God said, he knew God heard, and he knew it by faith. In the midst of this prayer, he says the most interesting thing. It's almost parenthetical, but it's filled with truth. In verse 8 NKJV, he says,

> 8 “Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy.”

That's interesting. Why would you say that, Jonah? Well, the word *worthless* means “empty.” It means “void of any power, void of any substance.” It literally means “a lie.” Those who regard lying idols. An idol is something that the enemy sets up as the truth. The nations around Israel worshiped idols. It was just a lie. It was a work of the enemy. Sometimes Israel was tempted to set up idols themselves.

The idol said, “Listen, if you worship me, I will bless you. If you serve me, I will give you abundant crops, and I will give you rain.” It was a lie; the idol had no power to do that. It was a lie set up by the enemy. The idol said, “Listen, if you give sacrifices to me, I will cause your barren wife to bear children.” A lie. You sacrifice your children in the fire, and this idol promises, “I will bring the defeat of your enemies, and I'll protect your city walls.” A lie, a lie, a lie. Those who regard worthless idols or lying idols, or we could just say, those who regard a lie of the

enemy, forsake their own mercy. There's an old English translation, and it puts it this way: “Those who observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.”

I remember when I was a Bible school student—a little while ago—and, just to make ends meet, I was doing construction work. I was building houses. I worked as a waiter for a season in a restaurant. I worked as a cook in a restaurant. One of the things I did on the side with a friend of mine was we would get these boards. We would make one in the shape of a whale because some of the translations say that a whale swallowed Jonah. Literally, in the Greek and in the Hebrew, where you find Jesus talking about it in the New Testament and here in the Book of Jonah, it's a generic term meaning a great sea creature, a great fish. Maybe it was a whale, maybe it was a fish, I don't know.

But we got these boards, and we would trace out the pattern of a whale, cut it out, and then sand all the edges. Then we would stencil this verse, Jonah 2:8, inside the whale, and then I would get a router and rout it out: “Those who observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.” Then we would stain it dark inside the letters and stain the whole thing, put a little piece on the back so you can hang it on the wall, and we went and sold them in a local Christian bookstore. I think we sold them for $12 apiece, and they would sell them for $20.

Friend, it's so applicable to us. When we regard, when we give heed to, when we give attention to the lie of the enemy, we forsake, we cut ourselves off from the mercy that God wants to give to us. I shared last time, you get somebody that's maybe not a believer, and they've bought into this lie from the enemy that, “Well, you've sinned too much. God doesn't love you. There's no way that you could be saved.”

I remember when I first became a Christian, there was a girl I knew, and I was with her in a park one day, talking to her about Jesus. I'm a brand-new Christian. I don't understand anything, but I know I've been changed. I've been washed in the blood of the Lamb. I'm talking to her about Jesus, and she suddenly starts to cry. I said, “What's wrong?” She says, “Bayless, I know God hates me.” I said, “God doesn't hate you. What do you mean, God hates you?” She says, “Well, I never told you before, but before we met, I had two abortions.” She said, “I murdered two of my own children. I know God must hate me.”

She cried, and she cried. I didn't know what to tell her. I hadn't begun reading the Bible much yet. I didn't know that the Scripture said, “As far as the East is from the West, so far He has removed your transgressions from you.” I didn't understand everything. I wish I'd known those things to tell her, but she had bought into this lie that because of her sin, God hated her and she could never be saved. She could never experience salvation the way that I had because of what she had done in her past.

She had regarded a lie of the enemy, what is referred to here as a worthless idol, a lying vanity. It kept her from experiencing God's mercy. It can be applied in so many ways. You can get a Christian who gives heed to a lie of the enemy and says, “Well, this depression that you are experiencing every day, that's your cross to bear. It's a gift from God. You just do your best to keep a good attitude, keep a stiff upper lip, and keep your chin up. This is just your cross to bear.”

If you believe that lie, and that's what that is, you'll never receive the mercy from God that wants to lift that from you, because the Scripture says in Isaiah 53 about Jesus that He was oppressed. He was afflicted, yet He didn't open His mouth. He bore that oppression for you.

It's a part of redemption. God doesn't oppress people as some sort of a gift; that's not a cross to bear.

Now, we understand that all those who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Jesus said, “If you forsake houses and families for My sake in the gospel, you will receive a hundredfold now in this time with persecutions.” It comes with it. The godly will suffer persecution. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. So, we understand that sometimes the road that we walk when we follow Christ will have enemies, and there's going to be opposition.

But my friend, listen carefully. God will never put anything on you that Jesus died to redeem you from. The Scripture says that “He bore your sickness, carried your pains, and by His stripes you are healed.” The Bible says that “He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Christ.” The Scripture says, “He was oppressed. He wore that crown of thorns upon His brow so that your mind could know peace.”

He is the God of peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He said, “When we let our requests be made known with thanksgiving, He'll give us peace that surpasses all understanding. No, God is not putting oppression on you. God is not afflicting you with sickness. God is not tempting you with sin. No, those things that Christ died to redeem us from, God does not tempt us with or place upon us. That's a lie of the enemy. But if we give heed to that, if we listen to that, we'll never receive the mercy of peace. We'll never receive the mercy of healing. We'll never receive the mercy of living a righteous and holy life, and we will not experience the power to do that. So, this is so good.

Jonah, in the middle of his trouble, just said this amazing thing, “Those who observe, or give heed to, or pay attention to lies of the wicked one, lies of the enemy, forsake their own mercy.” Jonah, what was your lie of the enemy, the thing that you were choosing not to pay any attention to?

Well, I think it might have been something like the devil whispering to him, “Jonah, it doesn't make any difference that you've decided to obey God. You've gone too far. You're going to die in this fish. God didn't hear your prayer. It doesn't matter that Solomon said, ‘If you'll turn toward the Holy Temple and pray, that your prayer will enter the temple, God will hear and God is going to bring rescue.’ No, it doesn't matter. God didn't hear your prayer, Jonah.”

Think about it. Some of you are surrounded by problems right now. You look in front of you, you’ve got a problem. You look behind you, you’ve got problems. Everywhere Jonah looked, there were fish. He looked up, there's fish. He looked down, there's fish. He looked in front of him, there's fish. He looked behind him, there's fish. I'm sure the devil's whispering in his ear. Friend, the devil is so cruel. “Jonah, you've disobeyed God. You put all those other sailors' lives in jeopardy. You didn't care about them. You didn't want to obey God. You hated those Ninevites. You would have rather died than obeyed God. Too late for you, little buddy.”

The devil loves to do that. Even when a child of God repents, the devil loves to heap condemnation on them. He says, “No, you've gone too far. You've sinned too much. You've been too stubborn. You've been too rebellious. God's not going to hear your prayer.” So, Jonah had to deal with that just the same way that we do. Jonah said in verses 9–10 NKJV,

> [9] But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation (or deliverance) is of the Lord. [10] So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Now, Jonah said, “I'll pay what I have vowed.” In other words, “I'm going to go preach to Nineveh. I'm going to go bring Your message to those wicked Assyrians. I'm going to do what I vowed to do.”

It's interesting, Jonah is still in the fish. This is a prayer that he prayed. He said, “I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving.” That is important as well. I want to talk about it for a few minutes because it was a sacrifice. Jonah described being in the belly of that fish like being in hell. Seaweed wrapped around his head. He said, “My *affliction*—I cried.” It means “to be cramped, to be bound.” He said, “I'm going to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving.” That’s the Hebrew word *Todah*. It literally means “to offer thanks to God in advance.” It means “to extend the hand in agreement with what has been said by God.”

Literally, that is what it means. “God, You've said that anyone who looks towards Your temple, even if they're in trouble because of their own stupidity, because of their own rebellion, because of their own bad choices, but if they'll look again towards You, if they'll get their heart right to You and they'll pray and they'll humble themselves, God, You will hear and You will bring deliverance.” So, Jonah says, “I'm going to offer the sacrifice of *Todah*.” Literally, it means “to lift the hand in agreement with what has been said.” “God, You said that if I turned my heart towards You and pray, that You'd hear, and You'd bring deliverance.”

I imagine Jonah is restricted. He's got seaweed wrapped around him. He's gasping for any breath that somehow God has miraculously given him. I imagine him just sort of lifting his hand in there like this. “God, I thank You.” It means to worship God and thank Him for what He said. To place yourself in agreement. “Lord, I thank You. You said that if I look towards Your holy temple—Lord, I'll do what You said. And I thank You that You'll do what You said. You heard my prayer.” He begins to offer the sacrifice of praise to God. It is giving thanks for the answer before you see it. It is faith in action. It is agreeing with God's Word before the manifestation appears.

Friend, you can do that. I can do that. “The Word said if I prayed toward Your Holy Temple, You'd hear, You'd forgive, and You would deliver me. God, I thank You. It's done. I don't care if I'm still in the belly of this fish, I count it as done.” Friend, if you think you got problems, you don't have any of the problems that Jonah had at that moment. God can deliver you. He can help you. Then he said, “Salvation is of the Lord.” That word means “deliverance, freedom.” It's from the Lord. I'm looking to Him. So, if I look to His Word, and I thank Him, and I set myself in agreement with His Word, instead of regarding the lying vanities, the lies of the enemy, then I will experience God's mercy and His forgiveness.

I just want to ask you. We all go through stuff. Every one of us faces stuff. You may be in the middle of a lot of family drama right now. Listen, every family has a bit of drama. The ones who say they don't are lying. You may be going through some family drama right now. You may be in trouble because of your own sin. You may have financial problems. You may be ill in body. You may be grappling with a deep, dark depression. You may be worried sick over your children, on and on. We're living in a broken world. We all face difficulties, problems, and attacks of the enemy.

My question to you is, have you been giving attention to the lies of the enemy or to God's promise? Have you looked to God's presence and to God's promise, or have you been consumed with your circumstances and with the lies that the enemy has been whispering to your mind? Psalm 50:23 NIV says this, “Who so offers thank offerings." *Todah*, to lift the hand in agreement with what has already been said, to praise God in advance for what His promise declares before the manifestation ever comes. Who so offers thank offerings, Todah, just like Jonah did in the belly of the fish. Who so offers. . .

> [23]. . . thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.

Friend, when I praise God in advance, and I set myself in agreement with what He has said, I prepare the way for God's deliverance to reach me. I prepare the way. I make the way smooth for the hand of God to come. I'm not forsaking my own mercy when I do that. I'm providing a way for God to come with His power, His mercy, and His help. Now, I want to share with you a story over the next few minutes that we have together that is so powerful. You may be familiar with it. You may not. But when Israel left the land of Egypt to come into the promised land, God had told Abraham, “Listen, your seed, your offspring are going to possess this land that you're just a sojourner in.”

So the very generation that God had pinpointed that was going to come into the land, they're there. Moses is leading them. They send 12 spies into the promised land. They go across the border into the promised land just to check things out. There's one leader from each of the 12 tribes. They go as spies into the land. They come back, and say, “It's everything God said it would be there. It's fruitful. It's got the vineyards, the olive trees, and everything God said. However, there are giants, there are walled cities, and we can't do it. It doesn't matter what God said. We're not able.”

I remember I was preaching in—I don't know how else to put it. It was basically a church that this guy had done in an inner-city area, and it was mostly ex-gang members. This guy had a calling to the gangs, and he had won so many of them to Christ. It was amazing, and I was invited to go preach there. We had marvelous meetings, and then we had a lunch afterward with a bunch of the guys. So, there's all these guys, they're all ex-gang members. They're all tattooed. You can tell they've been around the block a few times. This guy sits next to me, and he's got a cane and has tattoos everywhere. He starts showing me some of the tattoos on his arm, and there are these big scars on his arm.

I go, “What's that from?” He says, “Well, some of my old gang affiliation tattoos, I didn't want them anymore. So, I put a butter knife in the fire, heated it up, and I got rid of them with a red-hot butter knife.” Anyway, he starts telling me his story. He was what they called a veterano. He had been in the gangs for a long time. He was an older guy in the gangs. Most of them didn't live that long. He had killed a rival gang member. He's sleeping on the couch in somebody's house one day, and some guys from that rival gang came in, snuck in through a window, put a .38 next to his head, and fired.

He miraculously lived, and I think it was in the hospital that somebody led him to Christ. There were still some effects. He had to walk with a cane, but he could talk perfectly, and he could function perfectly. He and I sat down, and we had lunch together. So, he's telling me the story. Then he looks at me, and he's got a really thick accent. He says, “Hey preacher, do you know what the uncompromised Word of God is?” I go, “Tell me, what is the uncompromised Word of

God?" I got my Bible sitting there. He said, "The uncompromised Word of God means there's no buts in this Book." I don't think I've ever heard a better explanation.

So anyway, the Israelites here in this story said, "Well, it's everything God said, **but** we can't do it. There are giants in the land, et cetera." Let me read to you from Numbers 13:27–30 NKJV, where they talked about it. It says,

> 27 They told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 28 Nevertheless (But) the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan." 30 Then Caleb (he's one of the 12 spies) quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

Now Caleb saw the same walled cities they saw. He saw the same giants that they saw, but he said, "We're well able to do it." Later on in the next chapter, Joshua said, "Their defenses departed from them. The Lord is with us. They're bread for us. Let's go up." So, Joshua and Caleb are the only 2 of the 10 spies who set themselves in agreement with what God had already said, because God had said to Joshua and to Moses, "Every place the sole of your foot treads, I've given it to you. I've given you the land." So, two of these guys, are agreeing with God. The other 10 guys say, "No, can't do it. Can't do it. There are giants." We read in verses 31–33 NKJV,

> 31 But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." 32 And they gave the children of Israel a bad report . . .

I like how other translations say, "They gave an evil report." One that disagreed with what God had said, a report that disagreed with what God had promised."

> 32 And they gave the children of Israel a bad report (an evil report) of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. 33 There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

So they said, "When we looked at ourselves and looked at them, we felt we looked like grasshoppers. So are we in their sight." In other words, "When they saw us, they thought, 'These guys are just bugs to be squashed. They are just grasshoppers. These Israelites are nothing for us.'" They convinced the entire nation of Israel to rebel against God, to not believe God's promise, and to not go up to the promised land. So, they spent the next 40 years doing laps around Mount Sinai, and they didn't go in. That generation died off, another generation is going to go in. Now Joshua was at the helm of leadership. He sent spies. Again, they ended up in the house of Rahab the harlot. Listen to what happens. In Joshua 2, she hides them on the roof up there. It says this in verses 8–11 NKJV,

> 8 Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, 9 and said to the men: "I know that the Lord has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. 10 For we have

> heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt (40 years ago), and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed (40 years previously). [11] And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath."

Now here she is telling the truth of what went on 40 years before. "When we heard about this stuff 40 years ago, everyone was terrified. Everyone was shaking in their boots. Every man's heart had melted. There was no courage left in anyone." Do you realize what we just read? Forty years before the Israelites said, "No, they see us, and we're like grasshoppers in their sight. When they see us, they're not afraid of us at all. They think they're just going to squash us." But the truth was that these men of Jericho and these inhabitants of the land were terrified.

Here it is. They failed to inherit what God had promised them because they believed a lie. One lie kept them out of the promised land for 40 years. One lie kept that entire generation from inheriting what the Lord had promised to them.

My friend, as we go back to the book of Jonah, when we regard, when we give heed to, when we listen to the lies of the enemy, we forsake our own mercy. Who told them what the Canaanites were thinking? Where did they get that from? Well, it was from the enemy. It was a lie that the enemy whispered to them, and they picked it up and began to speak the lie, which was opposed to what God had said.

Joshua and Caleb were the only ones who agreed. They set themselves in agreement with God's Word and 40 years later, the only two people from that generation who made it into the promised land were Joshua and Caleb. The two who had set themselves in agreement with God's Word experienced what God had promised them. They inherited the promise. The rest did not. For us today, we need to determine whether we're going to set ourselves in agreement with God's Word and praise Him for His promises in advance of their manifestation or if we're going to give our attention to the lies of the enemy. I hope you choose to believe God.

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