Jonah: When God Turns You Around

by Bayless Conley

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Hello friend, I'm so glad that you have joined me. We are in a really interesting study right now, we're looking at Jonah. The story of Jonah is just amazing. He was a prophet. You can look in 2 Kings 14, where one of his prophecies came to pass very specifically. Jesus, in Matthew 12, refers to Jonah as a historical event, and how, as well as it being something that literally happened, was a symbol, a type, and a shadow that pointed to Christ's own death, burial, and resurrection. Now in Jonah 1:1–2 NKJV, it says,

> [1] Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, [2] "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

Jonah needed to arise; it literally means "stir yourself up, go," and, "I've got a message for you to share with the Ninevites." God said, "Their wickedness has come up before Me." It's like the same sense that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah had reached the brim of the cup and was overflowing, and judgment was going to come, so God sent angels down to go and see if the wickedness is all together, "Has come up before Me." So, there's a bit of picture language here, but in some way or another, their wickedness had literally made a statement in heaven itself, and judgment was going to come to Nineveh.

They were historically one of the most savage and wicked nations to ever exist on the face of the earth. I shared last time how, when they would come and conquer a city, they weren't like the Romans, who would leave a garrison behind to keep order; they would just basically kill everyone. They would skin most of the men alive, hang their skins on the city walls, or they would impale them on a pole, hang them up, and allow them to die a slow death as they hung with a pole through their rib cage. Everyone was afraid of them.

Every Israelite knew about the Ninevites; they were an absolute threat to the nation of Israel. Jonah knew about them, and God says, "Their wickedness has come up before Me." God is sending Jonah with a message of repentance. Imagine that. God is giving them a chance to repent and turn away from their wickedness. He's giving them a chance not to be destroyed. I'm telling you God is a God who is full of mercy. We read on in verse 3 NKJV,

> [3] But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Now Jonah, rather than obeying God, got on a ship to go to a place in modern-day Spain, basically as far away as you could possibly get from Nineveh in the known world, about 2,000 miles away. Why did Jonah do that? Well, he thought, "If I'm so far away physically, then I can't possibly obey God. They won't hear the message, and they're going to be destroyed." And that's what Jonah wanted.

In fact, he talked about that in chapter 4 and verse 1. He said, “The reason I did this, God, I know You're merciful and compassionate.” When the Ninevites repented and turned to God, Jonah was upset because he wanted them to be destroyed. He didn't want the city to be saved. He actually said as much, and it reminds me of some Christians. They don't want to share the gospel with some people. They assume that they just burn in hell.

My friend, that is not a Christ-like spirit. We need to arise, we need to go, and we need to cry. We need to share the gospel message with people, tell them to repent and believe the gospel. So, Jonah gets on this ship, and he heads for Tarshish, again, modern-day Spain, verses 4–5 NKJV,

> 4 But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

Now, this is interesting. Here, Jonah is disobeying God. He's going away from God, and he finds himself in a storm. I'm going to talk more about that in a moment. But there's something interesting here. It says that Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare.

My friend, there's always a price to pay for sin. There's always a price that you have to pay for disobeying God. But he went down to Joppa and found the ship. He went down into the ship, and then we read that Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship. So, from the moment he began to disobey God, the moment he turned his back on the will of God for his life, things began to go down, down, down.

I lived in Mexico many years ago, after I was a believer. And we used to have this children's chorrito, this chorus that we would sing with the kids about Jonah. In part of the chorus, it would stop and there was just speaking. They would talk about Jonah being thrown and how the great fish swallowed him. Then all the kids would say, “Abajo, abajo, y más abajo.” He went down, down, and further down.

Some of you, your life has been going down, down, down. If you take time to pray about it—you may not even need to. But if you do, many of you will find out you can trace that right back to the point that you turned your back on what God told you to do, that you haven't done what the Lord has asked you to do. It's interesting that Jonah found this ship going to Tarshish; in Hebrew, it has the connotation of unexpectedness. Jonah happened upon the ship.

Listen, when a person decides to run from God, Satan always provides complete transportation facilities. You don't want to run from God; the devil will help you run from God, but your life will go down, down, down. Jonah knew exactly what he was doing. We're not talking about someone who was ignorant or immature. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord. There's a city of possibly one million people hanging in the balance, and he's running from God's will.

So, what happens? The Lord sent a storm. Now, somebody said right away, “Well, I just don't believe God sent it out. That doesn't agree with my theology.” Well, you ought to change your theology then. Your theology ought to agree with the Bible. The Scripture says, “God sent the storm.”

Now, it doesn't say God made Jonah sick. It doesn't say God gave Jonah cancer. But God stirred things up because He wasn't letting Jonah get away with what Jonah knew was wrong. Maybe things are stirred up for you right now. Maybe, just maybe, it's a storm that God sent because He's not letting you get away with having that kinky boyfriend and compromising your morals. Maybe He's not letting you get away with selling soap when you're called to preach the gospel.

Perhaps there's something that you know God wants you to do, that you're called to do, that you've been assigned to do, and you've been running from it. God in His mercy is not letting you get away with it because, A, it's going to affect other people in a huge way and affect their eternities. But, B, my friend, life outside of the will of God is down, down, down, and God, in His mercy, is trying to help you.

Now, we read on in the story here, and it says in verse 5, “They were afraid, they cried out, and Jonah lay down, and fell fast asleep.” It's interesting. He's sleeping while people are perishing. It does remind me a bit of the church. People are perishing in the darkness, and the church is asleep in the light. Jonah 1:6–12 NKJV,

> 6 So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise,
> call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.” 7 And
> they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause
> this trouble has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then
> they said to him, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is
> your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what
> people are you?” 9 So he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of
> heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” 10 Then the men were exceedingly
> afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from
> the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. 11 Then they said to him, “What
> shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?”—for the sea was growing more
> tempestuous. 12 And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the
> sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”

So, Jonah was smart enough to know. Again, it just strikes me, he's asleep while judgment hangs over Nineveh. Aren't these sailors like most folks? They only pray when they're in trouble. They cried and prayed to their idols, but they got no answer. There's only one God who hears and answers prayers. It's the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. My friend, He will hear, and He will answer your prayer.

Now, I'd like to just move from this a little bit and share some thoughts with you. Here, Jonah said, “It's because of me.” They're all in trouble, and it's because of Jonah. When there's sin in the camp, it causes problems. If you don't think so, read the story in Joshua 7 about Achan. He sinned, and they'd gone to the second city in the Promised Land. They just defeated Jericho. They thought it was going to be the same at A.I., and they were grievously defeated there.

Then Joshua falls before God and says, “God, what are we going to do? Why have You let this happen?” God says, “Get up. There's sin among the people, and that's why this has happened.” It was a guy named Achan who stole some Babylonian garments, some silver, and some things and buried them in his tent. But his sin affected the whole nation. You might be thinking, “Wait a minute, one person's sin can foul things up for other people?” Yes, it can. Especially when you have the authority to do something about it, and you don't.

Now, I'm going to say especially in that—but some of you know in your own family situation, there was one person who sinned, but it brought grief to the whole family. It affected the kids. It affected the other spouse. It maybe affected your financial situation. It affected your reputation in the community. One person's sin affected a lot of people.

It can be true in the church as well. When there's, let's say, on a church team, and I think in these terms because I am a pastor, a lot of my world has to do with the workings of a church. If you get someone who's in known sin and you have authority and they don't repent, and you have authority to do something about it and you don't, it will affect the whole team. It will affect the whole church.

I remember listening to a man many, many years ago. He talked about a church that—actually not a church, his ministry. He had pastored several churches, but at this time, he was doing an itinerant ministry and had a number of other things, and was really having a great impact in his particular region. He found out that one of the men on his team, one of the staff members, was involved in gross sexual sin. It had been going on for a long time.

It wasn't the kind of thing where they said, “Okay, we're going to restore you.” Certainly they would try and want to restore him, but not while he continued with his job. Because the nature of his sin brought quite a bit of reproach and created a lot of problems. The guy was unrepentant, unfortunately, so they fired him. They cut him off that day. They said, “You're gone. You're fired.”

And the thing that struck me about having that conversation, several things I thought about afterward, the first was the guy was unrepentant. He didn't want to change, so there was no restoration possible. But here's what he said, “We had been struggling. We'd been struggling financially, and everything was so hard.” There are hard seasons in ministry. Ministry is not for the faint of heart.

But he said, “The moment we dealt with that, when we knew about that sin, and we dealt with it, it was like we had been driving a car with a parking brake on. Suddenly, you took the parking brake off, and the car just lurched forward. The moment we did that, the parking brake went off, and everything lurched forward. The finances changed, and money began to come in that we'd been trusting God and believing God for, and momentum just surged, and so many things changed.”

Listen, as a pastor, I've been pastoring for, oh my, 46–47 years, something like that, quite a while, 46 years. I was an assistant pastor for a couple of years, and then we've been here at Cottonwood for a long time. We started in 1983. So anyway, I've been pastoring for quite a few years in one form or another. But on a few occasions, we've had to deal with sin in the camp. People come to the services, and we have a large church. You just don't know everybody. The fact is, sinners need to be saved, and we want sinners to come to church so they can hear the good news and be saved.

We need to take it out where they are, and we encourage our people to invite friends, family, neighbors, and work colleagues into the church so that they can hear the good news. Somebody says, “Well, there was somebody smoking out in the church parking lot.” Well, good, that's the kind of people we want.

I'm getting off my notes right now, but we brought a country western singer in one time who was well known, and we went out to every cowboy bar, and honky-tonk within a 25-mile radius of the

church every redneck bar. We passed out flyers for this concert that was going to happen with him. The country singer had gotten saved, gloriously saved, and so we brought him into the church. He says, “Oh, pastor, I'll just do my Christian songs.”

We said, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. We've invited all sorts of people. There's going to be a lot of people that want to hear your hit songs from before, so do some of those songs, and then shift gears and talk about your relationship with the Lord a little bit. Do your Christian songs, and then I'll get up to interview you, and then we'll throw out the nets.”

So, it was something else. There were guys having tailgate parties with cases of beer out in the church parking lot. Those are the kind of people we wanted to come. We weren't going to go out there and say, “Well, you've got to get this beer off the church parking lot.” You're out here drinking on church property, and you've had too many beers.” No, we wanted them to come. Those are the people we need to reach. They came in, and listen, I think we had literally several hundred people who responded and came forward to give their lives to Jesus that night.

So, we want sinners to come to church, but when you've got the church team, the people who are serving those who come, and there's somebody involved in gross sin, and they don't want to repent, you have to deal with it. Over the years, I had to deal with situations like that.

I remember one time, and it was the Holy Spirit who told me that there was somebody on our church team in a very influential position, I found out supernaturally; I was in prayer. The Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, “They are stealing money from their particular area that they're in,” and they did have access to finances. So, I went to them, and I just said, “Have you been stealing from the church?” They said, “No, of course not, Pastor. Why would you ask that?” I said, “Well, the Holy Spirit told me that you've been stealing.”

I remember they looked away and said, “Well, I've been borrowing, and I plan on paying it back.” Well, it turned out they'd been borrowing for a long time, and large sums of money had been borrowed, which, by the way, never got paid back. I let them go because they'd been “borrowing” God's money that people had been giving and sowing into the church. When that happened—okay, parking brake off.

So, here we have this story of Jonah, and he says, “This is because of me.” All these guys are in a storm because Jonah is there. Jonah says, “It's here because of me. You want the storm to cease for everybody. Throw me in, and the storm will cease.” Now, it's interesting to me. It doesn't say at all that Jonah prayed. Jonah didn't pray before he got on the ship to go to Tarshish. He didn't even pray when he was on the boat. He said, “Just throw me in.”

He didn't pray that God would rescue him. There was nothing. So, the guys cast, in this story, they cast lots to see who this was before Jonah finally confessed. That word *lots*, means “stones or pebbles,” sort of dice, colored stones, pieces of wood of different lengths, sort of like we would draw straws to see who gets the short straw.

The men of old believed that the will of God or of the gods was made known this way. That the outcome was supernatural, and for them, it settled disputes. Interestingly enough, apparently, from what we find in Scripture, God did make His will known to people through this and through similar methods. Let me read a couple of Scriptures to you, if I can. Proverbs 16:33 NKJV, it says,

> 33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Joshua 18:10 NKJV,

> [10] Then Joshua cast lots for them in Shiloh before the Lord, and there Joshua divided the land to the children of Israel according to their divisions.

So, at least part of the way that Joshua divided up the promised land between the different tribes was by casting lots. We come to the New Testament. In Acts 2, Jesus has arisen from the grave, and He's ascended into heaven. Now, based on something that the book of Psalms said, they discerned the will of God first by going to the written Word of God. It says in verse 20 of, excuse me, not Acts 2, Acts 1:20 NKJV,

> [20] "For it is written in the Book of Psalms: 'Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it';' and, 'Let another take his office.'"

They realized this was talking about Judas, who betrayed Jesus, who committed suicide, and so they realized that the Scriptures were telling them they needed to get a replacement for Judas. So, it goes on, and says,

> [21] "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, [22] beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."

So, they're specific things. Some people say, "Well, the apostle Paul became the 12th apostle." No, he didn't. There are other apostles besides Paul who are mentioned in the New Testament, a number of them. But this had to be somebody specifically that accompanied them, somebody of the 70, no doubt, that Jesus also chose, who were disciples that followed Him. Who were there all the way from the baptism of John until the time that Jesus was taken up. They needed that person to replace Judas. So, there were certain qualifications. Verses 23–26 NKJV,

> [23] And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. [24] And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen [25] to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." [26] And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Interesting. Even the apostles, after the resurrection, they're basically, "Okay, we've narrowed it down to these two guys." They pray and say, "Now we're going to roll the dice and see which one God has chosen." Now, here's something you need to consider. That certainly is true. That was in Acts 1, but in Acts 2:1, the day of Pentecost arrives, where the group of 120 were all filled with the Holy Spirit in that upper room.

After the day of Pentecost, when the believers, the apostles, and the other believers, the 120 in that upper room, from that day when they were filled with the Holy Spirit, this method of determining God's will is no longer used. There's no record of it anywhere in Scripture. They never cast lots again to determine the will of God. They never said, like Gideon said, "God, if You want me to do this, let it be all dry around the fleece, let the fleece be wet, let the fleece be dry, let it be wet all around, and then I'll know that this is Your will for me to do that."

Some people say, “Well, you need to put out a fleece.” Gideon did that, but he was raised in an idolatrous family. He didn't know the Lord the way that we know Him. Yes, even the apostles here, when they're choosing someone to replace Judas, they cast lots, but they weren't yet filled with the Holy Spirit. After the day of Pentecost, when they were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, never again did they determine the will of God through this means. The born-again believer is to be led by the Spirit, not put out a fleece. If you put out a fleece, you're going to get fleeced. In other words, you will be taken advantage of.

You don't find God's will by opening the Bible and putting your finger on some random verse, and that's what you're supposed to do. You need to spend time in prayer, spend time in God's Word, first of all, and they did that right. They went to the Word of God. That's where they began, and then they prayed. Friend, “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirits. We do have an inward witness now that we are born again and filled with the Spirit. So, things have changed.

Of course, in the story of Jonah, going all the way back—I think I got off on a few tangents today, but hopefully it's been helpful for you—back to Jonah, the lot fell on Jonah. The truth is, your sin will find you out, and it can be embarrassing when God exposes those sins in the company of unbelievers. The lot fell on Jonah, but they wanted to hear it from Jonah himself, and we read this again in verse 8. They said, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble? We want to hear it out of your own mouth.” So, this little thing they did, rolling the dice, pulling the straws, it pointed at Jonah, but they wanted Jonah to confess it from his own lips, which Jonah did do.

“What is your occupation?” They probably thought that it was some kind of shifty business to bring all this trouble on them, but he said, “I believe in the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” They've got to be thinking, “Wait, your God made the sea, and you're disobeying Him, and we're in this tempestuous storm? You're running from Him?” Because Jonah told them what he had done. He says, “God told me to go to Nineveh and to preach to them. I didn't want to do it, so I ran away, and that's why this storm is here. God is trying to get me turned around.” They had to have been absolutely horrified.

Now, how could someone who actually had a relationship with the living God, the God of heaven, the Creator of the sea and the dry land, the judge of all the earth, disobey Him and consider it a light thing? Jonah did not fear God as he should. Sometimes people have told me in a matter-of-fact way, “The Lord told me a long time ago to do this, but I've never done it.” It's just a light thing to them, and I think, “What? Then do it. Change, get busy, and do it.” How dare we disobey God and not declare the gospel and tell people to repent—to this generation, and the Ninevites, that we are living in now. We have been commissioned, called, and gifted to share the gospel with the lost and a dying world. We have the good news. Let's not keep it to ourselves. Let's not be Jonahs, but let's arise. Let's go, and let's cry out to this lost generation in Jesus' name.

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