

## **Jonah's BIG Problem**

**By Lee Roy Martin**

JONAH HAS A BIG PROBLEM. The Lord gives Jonah a message to preach in the wicked city of Nineveh, but Jonah balks (Jonah 1:1-3). Jonah's problem, however, is not preaching; he has preached before (2 Kings 14:25). But still he runs away from the presence of the Lord. At this point in the story we do not know why Jonah runs away, but clearly he has a problem.

He finds a ship going to Tarshish, which is at the end of the known world and 180 degrees away from Nineveh. But God, not willing to let Jonah escape his assignment, sends a big storm that threatens to sink the ship. The sailors are frantic and they throw everything overboard, and all the while, Jonah is sleeping soundly. How can he sleep through the storm? Because Jonah's problem is not the big storm.

The sailors awaken Jonah, and they learn that the storm is the result of Jonah's disobedience. Now Jonah's problem is not that he has lost his faith or denied the Lord. In fact he declares that he is an Israelite who fears the Lord, who created the sea and the dry land. Jonah knows that the storm is his fault, so he suggests that the sailors heave him overboard, but they are compassionate souls who row with all their might, trying to reach the dry land. Even though they eventually throw Jonah overboard, Jonah's problem is not the sailors.

Jonah hits the water with the expectation that he will drown, but to his surprise, God sends a big fish that swallows Jonah. After three days in the belly of the fish, God commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto the dry land. The fish obeys, because Jonah's problem is not the big fish.

Once Jonah has dried out, God speaks to him again, giving him the same mission: "Go to Nineveh ... and preach" (Jonah 3:2, *NKJV*). This time, Jonah obeys, but there is no indication that he is happy about the assignment. He reaches the big city and preaches a simple message of judgment. He says, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (v. 4). Amazingly, the whole city of Nineveh believes God and repents of their wickedness. God accepts their repentance and decides that He will not punish Nineveh. Jonah's preaching, therefore, is a great success. He has single-handedly saved an entire city!

But Jonah has a big problem. He is not happy about the salvation of Nineveh. Even though he believes that "salvation is of the Lord" (2:9), he really does not want God to save Nineveh. Nineveh, you see, is a cruel and fierce enemy of Israel. The armies of Nineveh have invaded Israel on several occasions, killing thousands of Israelites, burning villages, and stealing many cattle.

Jonah ran from his assignment because he was afraid God would be compassionate and forgive the evil Ninevites. Jonah has a big problem. But Jonah's problem is not the Ninevites; Jonah's problem is God.

Jonah has a problem with God. Jonah wants God to punish Nineveh, but God is compassionate and full of mercy. Jonah wants God to smite the enemy, but God created Jonah's enemies (yes, even our enemies are created in the image of God). Jonah wants justice to prevail, but God hears the prayers of repentance, and His heart is touched by the humility of the Ninevites who have fasted and prayed and mourned over their violence.

Jonah has a big problem with God, but God wants to save Jonah from his problem. To teach Jonah a lesson, God raises up a gourd plant to shelter Jonah; then God destroys the plant so that the sun beats down on Jonah's head.

When the plant dies, Jonah prays to die as well, and God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry about the gourd plant?" Jonah is now forced to admit his true feelings, and he replies, "Yes,

angry enough to die!” Now God presses home His most powerful point. He says to the sulking Jonah, “You had pity on the gourd plant, for which you did not work and you did not grow, and should not I have pity upon that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people, who are unable to discern right from wrong, and also many cattle?” (see 4:9-12).

Jonah does not answer. There is no need for an answer. We all know the answer. Jonah has a problem with God’s choice to grant mercy to those who are wicked and who have persecuted and abused the people of God. But God will not allow Jonah (or us) to continue believing in a God who prefers justice over mercy. God forces Jonah and us to realize that He is a God of grace, who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23).

Jonah is like the brother of the Prodigal Son, who was angry at his father’s grace and forgiveness. Jonah is like the Pharisee who praised his own righteousness, while the publican prayed for mercy; but it is the publican who went home justified. Jonah is like Peter, who had no intention of sharing the Gospel with the Gentiles until God spoke to him through a vision (Acts 10).

God commanded Jonah, “Go to Nineveh,” and Jesus commands us, “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.” In our day, we see great evil, great wickedness, great sin, and great apostasy. Paul, however, would tell us that where sin abounds, the grace of God does much more abound (Romans 5:20). Jesus did not come into the world to condemn sinners, but that sinners might be saved.

We have an assignment from God to win the nations to Christ. The nations, however, may be living right next door. Yes, your neighbor may be a Mexican, a Muslim Palestinian, a Russian, an Asian, or an African. Jesus says, “Go to them.” Will we go, or will we run away? God offers His grace to people who are different from us, who come from a different culture, who speak a different language, who wear different kinds of clothing, and whose skin is a different color. Jonah had a problem with reaching out to people who were different from him.

Jonah had a big problem. His problem was not the big storm or the big fish or the big city. His problem was the big heart of God that grants forgiveness to “whosoever will come.” I end this article like the writer ended the Book of Jonah—with a question. My question relates to the God who extends mercy and compassion even to our enemies: Do we have a problem with that kind of God?

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