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JONAH

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I support one of our schools' FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) programs, and this past Friday their lesson was about Jonah. Many people know the basic story of Jonah and the whale, but if you have not read the Old Testament book of Jonah, you may not know how much there is to glean from this story. The first two verses convicted my heart. *"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."³But 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.*

How human were Jonah's actions? The Lord tells him what to do, but Jonah does not do as the Lord says, he does something else. I will be the first to admit, I am guilty of this. In recent years, I have really been intentional about hearing the Word of God and being obedient, but I've been living for many more years than I have been obedient. Scripture tells us Jonah ran away from the Lord. I cannot say that I have tried to run away, but I have played deaf and dumb. I may not be alone. Has there ever been a time when the Holy Spirit told you to share the gospel with a total stranger who looked like he would cuss you out if you spoke to him? Did you share the gospel or walk away?

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and preach against their ways, instead he decided to head for Tarshish by boat. *“⁴Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.”* Notice, Scripture says, “the Lord sent...” This was not a random storm. This storm was sent by God. He has many different ways to encourage us to do as He says. I’ve heard many sermons and songs about the storms in our lives and how they make us stronger, how we’re always either entering a storm or coming out of one. Reading Jonah, makes me wonder how often our own disobedience may be the cause of our storms. Could our storms actually be God’s way of pressuring us to turn from our own ways to His ways?

The people on the boat were all praying to their gods, but none of their prayers seemed to help. They found Jonah and asked him to pray to his god, too! They began to cast lots to find out who may be responsible and the lots fell to Jonah. They questioned him. He said, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” The people are frightened for their lives and ask Jonah what they should do. Jonah tells them they should throw him overboard and everything will be okay. They don’t toss him, immediately, but eventually they do and the storm calms down. This segment made me think of how our disobedience may affect others. Those on the boat were not believers in the most high God, but the storm was not sent for them. They likely didn’t know any better than to worship their idols, but there was one on the boat who was worshipping/serving himself, and he knew better.

“¹⁷Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” The KJV Bible says the Lord *prepared*. ESV says the Lord *appointed*. Just as the storm was *sent*, the large fish was apparently sent, too. Jonah is under arrest. I know a little about digestive processes and being in the belly of a fish for three days is definitely not akin to spending three days at the beach. Fortunately he was swallowed whole, so he does what all of us do when it seems there is no other way - Jonah humbles himself to pray. His beautiful prayer is found in Jonah 2. This chapter ends with, *“¹⁰And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”*

Chapter 3 begins, *“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’ ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.”* Jonah endured two different ordeals, “storms,” due to his disobedience. Eventually, however, he did as the Lord told him to do. In chapter 4, however, he is unhappy, angry even, about the work God did in Nineveh through him. It seems Jonah never learned to understand his role in the world as compared to God’s role. The book of Jonah ends abruptly without a real closing. Jonah is angry that God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh - didn’t God also show mercy to him? The takeaway is that God is God and man is man. He is “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” (Rev. 22:13) Whenever we are tempted to challenge God’s authority we must ask ourselves whose plans we are to honor, His or our own. If we choose our own, which we have the freewill to do, prepare for a storm. Isaiah 48:18 tells us, “If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.” Amen.