

## Jonah Learns God's Approach to Racism

Once in the Kingdom of Israel a man named Jonah lived in Galilee. One day, God said to him, "Jonah, I want you to go to the city of Ninevah, and warn them that unless they repent, I will destroy their town; their wickedness is so bad that it makes me nauseated."

"What?" said Jonah, "I can't do that. Nineveh's a big place, and the people are not at all like we Israelites! People would think I was really strange if I told them to repent. Anyway, Lord, they're Assyrians. They have been so cruel to the Israelites and are fierce in battle. Why, they deserve to be punished! I surely wouldn't want them to repent! You plan disaster for them, and I'd say it's just what they deserve." Jonah surely didn't want to preach to these pagans. To himself he said, "What shall I do? I know--I'll run!"

So Jonah hurried to a nearby port named Joppa, finding a ship there headed for Tarshish; the destination didn't matter. He simply wanted to escape the presence of this God Jehovah, who had given him such a strange command. He asked what the fare was to Tarshish, and paid it. He was off. There, that should take care of the problem.

Jonah boarded the ship, and still hiding from the Lord, he went down into the hold of the craft. He felt relieved as it pushed off into the water. He even went to sleep.

### **Trouble!**

It wasn't very long, though, until it was apparent to those who knew Jehovah, that He had seen Jonah slip away. The ship suddenly became tossed with a fierce wind, which threatened to sink it to the bottom of the sea with everyone aboard. The pagan sailors, experienced with this body of water as they were, became frightened for their very lives, and started throwing equipment and cargo overboard to make the ship lighter as they shouted prayers to whatever god they knew anything about.

"Have we prayed to every one of the gods we know of?" someone asked.

"Where is the guy who boarded in Joppa?" questioned another.

"Maybe he knows of another god we could try. Isn't he one of those Israelites?"

The captain went to find him, and discovered that he was asleep in the hold. He roused the sleeping man. Jonah was afraid, hearing the loud voices. "Hey, maybe your god is the one who sent this storm!" they shouted, running into the hold. "What are you thinking of, sleeping at a time like

this? Call on your god; maybe he can do something about the mess we're in!"

The storm grew worse. At last the crew drew straws to see if they could find who brought this disaster upon them. Jonah got the short straw.

"Who are you?"

"What have you done?"

"What country did you come from?"

"What trade are you in?" Questions flew at the man from Israel.

"I am Jonah. My people serve the god Jehovah, maker of earth, sky, and sea. But I am running away from Him."

"Why? What have you done?" the men asked, afraid.

"Why did you do it? See what you have done!" they said.

"He wanted me to go and preach to Nineveh. But I hate the Ninevites. Why should I want them to be forgiven? I ran away," Jonah admitted to them.

"Tell us what to do to appease your god."

Jonah told them, "Just take me and throw me into the waves. It's my fault you're all having this trouble. Then everything will calm down."

"We can't do that!" the men shouted. They rowed and worked, and tried to bring their ship to shore. But they just couldn't seem to make any headway. Then in desperation they cried out to Jonah's God, saying, "We don't want to die because this man did wrong. Please don't punish us for his

death either." Then they followed Jonah's instructions, throwing him into the sea. The waters grew calm. The men fell on their faces and thanked Jehovah.

### **In the Big Fish**

God had a big fish ready, just at the right moment, and he swallowed Jonah in one gulp. It was, unknown to Jonah, a plan devised by God to save his life and get him to Nineveh. The disobedient Israelite stayed there for three days and three nights. Down, down he went to the bottoms of the mountains under the ocean. Seaweed that was in the fish's stomach wrapped around his head.

Jonah was sure he was done for. But while he considered the Lord and what power was his, the repentant missionary rode in his new craft to the shore, and God told the fish to spit him out on the land. And he did.

### **Ninevah**

Jonah stood upon the shore, dripping from his three-day visit to the depths of the ocean, with seaweed in his hair and a new desire to obey God. God repeated the orders he had given to Jonah: "Go and preach at Nineveh and tell them to repent."

Jonah traveled to the city of Nineveh, which was indeed a very large city. It would take a man three days to walk around it. The prophet of God began to preach, "Forty days will pass in which you can repent, then God will destroy this

city," and--wonder of wonders, the people repented. From the king on down to the beggar, all ate nothing and drank nothing, telling God of their sorrow for their evil ways, and hoping that he would not destroy them. Sackcloth and ashes were found on everyone, everywhere. God was so pleased that He did not carry through with the destruction of the city.

Jonah was not only surprised at his quick success, he was angry. After all, the Ninevites had led rotten lives, and God was letting them off, free!

### **Jonah Angry, God Pleased**

Jonah told the God of Israel, "Now that's exactly what I thought you'd do! I'd stick my neck out and tell them you are going to destroy the city and lo and behold, you let them talk you out of it! Now, what will I look like? Just let me die right here. I'm so embarrassed."

"You're angry that I forgave?" God responded.

Jonah walked like a sulky child to the outside of the city and built himself a small shelter from the sun where he could sit and watch to see if anything happened to the city. Soon the leaves of the roof withered, and God, who of course was watching, made a vine grow up like an umbrella quickly as a shade. Then he sent a worm to chew off the stem, and the vine withered also. God sent a hot breeze to blow on Jonah, and the sun became very hot. He was exceedingly sorry for himself, in the heat.

"Now Jonah," God told him, "you didn't have anything to do with the vine, yet you are sorry for yourself that it is gone. That's like my mercy. I sent a vine for one man. Don't you think it even more reasonable that a city of 120,000 people should be pitied by me, since they repented?

Mercy and repentance are what I value, not punishment."

Nobody knows if Jonah understood God's point, but Jonah had met the god of mercy, who is god of *all*.