

“Bad News, Everyone! God is Slow to Anger and Abounding in Love!” (Jonah 4)
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Jonah is a very familiar story to many of us. Jonah gets repeated all the time in children's ministries and Sunday Schools. It's a no brainer as a Bible story to share with children. It's a short book, and it involves an animal as a key feature. How fun!

We're going to read a common children's Bible version of the story. Listen to it and look at the pictures. Based only on this version of the story, what do we learn?

Here's the story based on The Beginner's Bible:

Jonah was a prophet of God. One day, God told Jonah, “Go to the big city of Ninevah. Tell them to stop doing bad things.”

But Jonah ran away. He did not want to go to Nineveh. Instead he got on a boat to sail across the sea. God sent a big storm to stop Jonah. The sailors on the boat were afraid. They thought the boat was going to sink.

Jonah told the sailors, “My God has sent this storm. If you throw me into the water, the sea will become calm again.”

So the sailors threw Jonah into the raging sea. Instantly, the sea became calm.

Just then, Jonah saw a big fish coming! Gulp! The fish swallowed Jonah.

For three days and nights, Jonah was inside the fish. He prayed to God, “Please forgive me.”

Then God told the fish to spit Jonah onto dry land. God told Jonah a second time, “Go and tell the people of Nineveh to stop doing bad things.”

This time, Jonah obeyed God. The people in Nineveh were sorry for doing bad things, so God forgave them.

What do we learn from the children's Bible version of this story? Based on this version of the story alone what lessons can we learn?

Friends of ours have a son, and when he was very young, probably preschool age, he put this story into use. He had done something wrong, and lost a privilege or a toy. He said he was sorry, but was told he couldn't have the privilege back. He smartly sobbed to his mom, “But. God. Gave. Jonah. A. Second. Chance!”

There's much we can learn from the stereotypical Sunday School teaching of Jonah. But there is so much more when we continue the story into chapter 4 of the book.

JONAH 4

What surprises do we find in Jonah 4 that we might not have considered before?

We ended the children's version with a happy Jonah sharing God's message with the crowd. He's reformed! He's changed his ways! He's obedient to God.

But in Jonah 4 and the book as a whole, we find a resentful, angry and spiteful Jonah. God gives him a people that he is supposed to serve – the Ninevites – and he resents them every step of the way. He hates them so much he refuses to deliver God's message. He despises them so much his message contains as little info as possible.

The people repent of their sin, despite Jonah doing a half hearted job. When the Ninevites turn from their wickedness and turn to God, Jonah is extremely disappointed.

Jonah puts God on blast for the outcome:

"Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah's complaints against God aren't the ones we usually hear. Jonah says,

- How dare you be so gracious!
- How dare you be so compassionate!
- How dare you be slow to anger!
- How dare you be abounding in love!
- How dare you hold back on giving punishment!

Jonah's fear was that if he gave God's message to the Ninevites, they would discover a God of love and mercy.

When Jonah gives the message, his hope is that they will not repent and instead God will make the people and the city suffer.

Jonah would rather see his enemies burned alive than turn to God.

The entire book of Jonah asks of us the question: **Are you ok with God loving your enemies?**

Jonah is emphatically NOT ok with this. So we ask ourselves, holding up the mirror of this story to our faces, and we ask, "Am I ok with God loving my enemies?"

Now you may say in response, “But I have no enemies.” “I am a Christian person! I could never hate anyone!” OK. Fine. Good for you? But who do you complain about constantly? What group of people or kind of person fills you with anger and maybe even hate. Maybe it’s even an individual. Let’s poll your family and friends – let’s ask them who you complain about most. “Yeah, dad has a really big problem with left-handed one-eyed carpenters.”

All of us have someone or some people that just drive us nuts. I can think of precisely the people group that drives me maddeningly angry. Over the past three years especially this people group has tested my patience. I feel my anger rise when I think of them. I see their cause on vehicles and t-shirts throughout the city – at best I roll my eyes, at worst I’m very angry. When I hear them mentioned on the radio I want to put my fist straight through the windshield.

That group of people, that causes me such angst and frustration, is of course the Calgary Flames. If you don’t know, the Calgary Flames are a professional hockey team. And they make me so mad.

The Flames are a high demand on the resources and money of a province that really should be spending its money elsewhere.

Over the past several years the Flames have caused deep pain for people I care about by being so bad in seasons and in the playoff. They disappoint and hurt the people that I love.

And their worst crime of all? They are persistently boring! Their players are boring. The people that cover the Flames are boring. They’re so boring and yet they are talked about all the time. If I want to listen to sports radio any time of year – even the summer – boring people talk on and on about the boring Flames. It makes me hostile!

But when I let the existence of the Calgary Flames get to me, it’s not helpful to me. I love sports – so why am I letting one team ruin that experience for me.

When I talk angrily about the Flames, other people get caught in the crossfire of my anger. I didn’t say anything negative in all of this about Flames fans, but if I go on an aggressive anti-Flame rant, Flames fans are going to feel like I’m angry at them, too. Even the people I care about that I think are harmed by the Flames are going to feel targeted by my words.

Obviously, the Calgary Flames are a silly example of people that make me angry. However, the anger and judgement that I carry towards other people or people groups gets me nowhere. It keeps me from peace. It keeps me from peaceful relationships with others. And it makes me a resentful human being.

Jonah has a people group that was brought to his attention. God sent him to those people. Jonah spent as little time as he could with these people and hoped for their doom.

We can also serve people and totally resent them at the same time. God can bring people to our attention, and we can “help them” while resenting them.

If you want to work with youth because you think teenagers are obnoxious and need to be straightened out, you might be a Jonah.

If you work with people with the purpose of teaching them, but you’d rather not learn from them in the process, you might be a Jonah.

There are so many pastors and mission workers and volunteers in our world that are resentful of the very people they are called to serve. It is so easy for us to forget that while we are being miserable, God is extending grace to us as well. The same mercy that you think an obnoxious person doesn’t deserve, you are receiving as well in that very moment.

Jonah’s accusation to God remains true: “I know you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

In saying this, Jonah forgets that God is extending that same grace, compassion, love, mercy and patience to him! All throughout chapter 4, while Jonah throws a rager of a pity party, God interacts with Jonah with patience, compassion and grace. God continues to provide for Jonah and be present with Jonah, even when Jonah is being completely ridiculous.

Are you ok with God loving your enemies? Are you ok when your enemies succeed? It’s something we need to ask ourselves.

As you think this through, ask yourself:

- Who are your Ninevites?
- Why do they bother you?
- Can you surrender them to the mercy of God? Can you love them?
- You live in that same mercy.