

# Are You Suffering From the Jonah Syndrome?

We all know that Jonah was the prophet who tried to run from God's call. But do you know the reason he tried to run? Jonah was afraid that if he preached repentance to the people of Nineveh, who were Israel's arch enemies, God would forgive them.

In other words, Jonah had a problem with the goodness of God.

He would have been much happier if God simply wiped out the people of Nineveh rather than had mercy on them, and he actually complained about this at the end of the book.

But as shocking as it is to see the wickedness of Jonah's heart, many of us are just like him. I call it the Jonah Syndrome, and in times past, it has affected me too.

Let me explain exactly what I mean.

We see from 2 Kings 14:25 that Jonah had no problem prophesying that the Lord would expand the borders of Israel, but when it came to going to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to warn the people that destruction was coming, he looked for a way out, knowing that the Lord was a merciful God and that if the Ninevites repented, God would forgive them.

Did Jonah care about his personal reputation, not wanting to look bad if the prophesied judgment didn't come to pass? That could definitely be part of it. But what we do know is that he had a real problem with the mercy of God.

The Scriptures state that after the people repented in sackcloth and ashes, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (Jonah

3:10).

And how did Jonah react? This was the greatest response to any message preached in human history, the greatest altar call ever given (to put it in contemporary terms).

Did Jonah rejoice? Not one bit. In fact, the Word says, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry" (Jonah 4:1).

How remarkable! Jonah was terribly upset that God had mercy on more than 120,000 people.

"And he prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Do you do well to be angry?'" (Jonah 4:2-4)

But it gets worse. God caused a plant to shelter Jonah from the heat, but then it died quickly, and the prophet got even angrier.

The Lord said to him, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

You might say, "Well, Jonah's attitude was miserable, but certainly none of us have attitudes that bad."

Are you sure?

Have you ever gone through a church split and found yourself upset because God still blessed the people on the "other side"

(of course, the “wrong side” from your perspective)?

Have you ever been hurt by a ministry and grumbled when the Lord continued to bless them and even work miracles for them?

Have you ever been glad (rather than grieved) to see a colleague fall, as if this vindicated you? (If a brother or sister’s failure is your success, you do not have the heart of the Lord.)

These are all symptoms of the Jonah Syndrome, and the sooner we recognize them, the sooner we can repent and ask the Lord for a transformation of heart.

A number of years ago, I was involved in a very difficult split, one which brought pain and confusion to many people, as much as we all tried to avoid it. Yet God sustained both of the entities involved, to our mutual surprise.

“Lord, how can you bless those people when they treated us so poorly?” we thought to ourselves.

“God, surely you won’t sustain them when they are so wrong in this matter!” those on the other side thought to themselves.

Yet the Lord blessed and sustained us both while we struggled to find common ground in order to reconcile.

The key that unlocked the door for reconciliation was the recognition that God was for both entities involved in the split, since He cared for both equally, loved the sheep involved in both groups equally, and wanted to bless all of us equally. (It’s also important to realize that none of us are ever perfectly righteous, whichever “side” we are on.)

I remember well the night of reconciliation and the hugs and tears and laughs and renewed fellowship, and I remember well how we smiled at one another and said, “I bet you were surprised to see how the Lord came through for us and sustained us!”

Yes, both “sides” were surprised to see that the Lord was for both of us.

This past week, having received a tremendous amount of criticism from some circles for appearing on Benny Hinn’s TV show, it dawned on me that some of his critics did not rejoice when he reconciled with his wife, while others were upset to learn that he renounced some erroneous teaching more than 20 years ago. They would rather see him fall than remarry his wife or repent of wrong teaching.

Some even told me that his audience would be too spiritually dull to hear the true gospel coming from my lips, a sentiment all too reminiscent of Jonah’s feelings towards the Ninevites.

How is this the spirit of Christ? (I shudder to think about some of the comments that will be posted in response to this article, as critics quote verses of judgment that rejoice in the fall of their enemies or that call for divine judgment on the “the wicked.” For my part, I am neither the defender nor the accuser of Benny Hinn’s ministry.)

Let’s remember the Lord’s words in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, where he rebukes those who had a problem with the owner’s goodness, asking, “Are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15)

And let’s remember the words of Jacob (James), that “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (Jam 2:13)

As we have received mercy, let us show mercy, never forgetting there are not different “camps” or “sides” in the Body of Christ – even if we use those terms descriptively – but just one family with one Father, and He desires to do good to all his children.

Can we share his heart?

(Some of this article was adapted from *Authentic Fire: A Response to John MacArthur's Strange Fire*.)

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