

Are You Running From Nineveh?

Like Jonah, many of us struggle to embrace God's will for our lives. Don't let reluctance prevent you from fulfilling His purpose.

Jonah the prophet was a man who heard the voice of the Lord. The Bible tells us that God spoke to him and gave him clear instructions: "'Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me'" (Jon. 1:2, NKJV).

But Jonah had a problem: He didn't want to do what God was asking him to do. Instead of obeying, he "arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (v. 3).

Basically, he said no to God and ran in the opposite direction.

Many of us are like Jonah. We receive a clear word from God, but we are either quietly rebellious or openly disobedient to His command. Often our reluctance to obey causes serious problems.

I know—because I had the same response Jonah had.

Called to Gather the City

Soon after I received a special visitation from God in 1997, the Lord called me to gather together the congregations in my city of La Plata, Argentina. He gave me a vision of revival there. When I closed my eyes, I could see a sports arena packed with people seeking the holiness of God.

After seeing that vision, I followed the conventional route and began to talk to some of my pastor friends who were

leaders in the city. They tried to discourage me from obeying God. The pastors will not pray or work together, they assured me.

Nevertheless, I printed some posters to announce the event. But when I found out that the city was holding a secular festival during that same time, I let the matter drop, assuming I hadn't heard God after all.

Three years later, the Lord grew silent in my life. I went for weeks without hearing anything from Him.

I traveled to England to minister in a conference there, but He did not speak to me. The glory came, miracles of transformation occurred, but when I returned to my hotel room, God was strangely quiet. I could not sense His presence. Concerned, I asked Him about it.

One afternoon I went jogging and took my tape recorder with me. I was listening to the sermon of the speaker who had preached before me at the conference. I wanted to get an overall view of what God was doing at the conference.

As I jogged, I heard the speaker say: "God doesn't like to repeat Himself. He will speak to us once and then silently wait for our obedience." By the time he finished saying those words, I was no longer running; I was kneeling on the ground.

"Lord, that's me," I said. "Three years ago you asked me to call the churches together in my city, and I didn't obey. Forgive me.

"If You will give me a second chance, I promise You won't have to say it again. This time I will obey."

I was like Jonah after he had been thrown off the ship headed for Tarshish and swallowed by a large fish—a little more willing to submit to God's plan than I had been previously (see Jon. 1:15,17).

God gave me the second chance I asked for. However, by now we were not living or pastoring in the city of La Plata. We had resigned our local congregation to embrace a worldwide vision the Lord had given us.

It would not be as easy to carry out God's plan as it would have been before. Nevertheless, I planned a citywide meeting for all the churches. To get the word out, I started recording radio programs for the Christian radio station in La Plata. On the programs, I talked about the meeting and invited the churches to participate.

When I approached one of the pastors in La Plata to ask for his support, he replied: "This is the worst time to organize a rally! Pastors are divided. We just had a new split in the city, and the spiritual atmosphere is not good.

"If it was bad before, it is worse now. Do not try to rent the sports arena; you are going to lose a lot of money."

But this time I did not allow the voices of doubt to deter me. I knew I had received clear direction from the Lord, and I had given Him my word. So I decided to go ahead with my plans, with or without the pastors' support, if they would just grant me permission.

Eventually I received an e-mail giving me "permission to fail," but that was enough. I was convinced that I would rather fail doing God's will than succeed doing my own.

"Lord," I said, "some pastors have already let me know they are not supporting us. Some of them are forbidding their congregations to come to these meetings. There is no way we can pull this together.

"But Lord, in obedience to You, I am going to rent that sports arena. Even if only 50 people show up, I will do it, and I will fulfill my duties in that city!"

A few weeks before the meetings started, the pastors began to believe that the meetings were God's will. Young people gathered from separate congregations for a youth rally. They printed flyers and distributed them to the city. Something new had started to happen.

By the time my wife and I walked into the sports arena, the place was packed. On the second day, I still had doubts—and as if to support my doubt, a downpour fell all that day.

But that night the arena was packed again. On the third day, it was overflowing. The local newspaper reported that more than 6,000 people were crammed into a space that supposedly seated only 3,000.

The results of those meetings continue to be seen today in La Plata. The pastors began calling the churches together and holding united meetings once a month. Subsequent large gatherings have occurred. Momentum for a citywide revival continues to build.

Fulfill the Plan of God

Citywide revival occurred in Nineveh, too, when Jonah finally obeyed God and proclaimed, "'Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!'" (Jon. 3:4). The people believed the word of the Lord, and the king instructed all citizens—rich and poor—to fast and give up their evil ways. The entire city turned back to God.

Wouldn't you be thrilled to see your city turn to God? Imagine what could happen if our civic and religious leaders would issue a proclamation similar to the one the king of Nineveh sent out! God could transform your city in a single day.

When God saw what the Ninevites did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened through Jonah. His mercy triumphed over judgment.

Interestingly, Jonah was not pleased with the Ninevites' response. He was upset that they had repented and their city had been spared!

That's because he had no compassion for the people. He obeyed God's command to speak to them, but he ministered without hope of their redemption. He wanted them to get what he thought they deserved.

God is calling the church today to a higher level. He is telling us that transformation is possible. Zechariah 3:9 proclaims, "I will remove the sin of this land in a single day."

The Lord can revive a city in one day—just as He revived Nineveh. The time we spend in prayer, fasting and proclaiming will not be in vain—God will send the harvest.

But problems occur when our stubborn will refuses to fulfill the plan of God. When we decide we want God to do things our way and only our way, we set ourselves up to miss the blessing He intends.

Jonah's resistance to doing God's will caused several problems. One of them was delay. If you postpone obedience, you delay the will of God for your life and your city.

In essence we, His people, are dragging our feet as we serve Him. That is why the church is advancing so slowly. If we would let Him take us with Him, the Holy Spirit could move much faster.

The real problem with delayed obedience is that it becomes disobedience. We can believe ourselves to be very spiritual—but if we have forgotten what the voice of the Lord has whispered to us in the past, then we are deceived. God does not forget, and He does not change His mind.

As my wife and I entered that sports arena in La Plata for the

united meeting we had finally planned in obedience to God's earlier word to me, a wonderful thing happened. People in the crowd began to stop me.

One man shook my hand and said: "Pastor, do you remember me? I was the taxi driver you witnessed to." Another lady came down from the bleachers and said: "Pastor Sergio, do you remember me? I was your neighbor, Coca. You stopped at my house and told me about Jesus. Now I am a committed Christian."

My heart rejoiced! I remembered the day I went to Coca's house in obedience to the Holy Spirit. She had gathered her teenage girls around her and made them turn off the television to listen to me.

When I had finished talking, I led her to the Lord. How happy I am that I did not postpone talking with her—I found out later that she died three months after I saw her at the united meeting.

Another problem caused by our disobedience is the negative influence it has on those around us. If we are not totally committed to the Lord and filled with joy about what God wants us to do, it will negatively affect our families or our marriages. Our churches will pick up on our attitudes, too.

It is unavoidable. If you are not in the will of God and are refusing to do what the Lord tells you, there will be an influence on others that is not good.

In Jonah's case, the negative influence was very evident. The boat he was in began to sink! A big storm came, and the people asked, "'For whose cause is this trouble upon us?'" (Jon. 1:8). They cast lots, and the results pointed to Jonah (see v. 7).

When we are not in God's will, we become the main problem, not the unbelievers around us. It was not the idol worshipers in the boat who were the problem at that moment. It was the

servant of the Lord who was hiding from the will of God. We become the problem and create new and unnecessary crises with our disobedience.

The men on the boat asked, “‘What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?’” (Jon. 1:11). But instead of saying, “Let’s hold hands and repent before God and pray,” Jonah said, “‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea’” (v. 12).

He was ready to die rather than comply with the will of the Lord. So they threw him into the ocean, and a big fish came and swallowed him without killing him.

When Jonah was entombed alive in the belly of that big fish, he began to pray and repent. Then he said, “‘I will pay what I have vowed’” (Jon. 2:9).

Finally, after being inside the fish, Jonah was willing to go where God had directed.

In other words, Jonah finally agreed to give God what he had promised. He had a change in behavior but not in attitude.

A lot of people comply externally with the vision of their church or with what God is doing in the city, but inwardly their hearts are not there. When our hearts are not in sync with our actions, there is no enjoyment.

But God is restoring the vision to see revival in our cities, and He is awakening us to the reality that He has called every one of us to be a part of the harvest. It is time to crucify our flesh and obey Him.

In a meeting recently, one young man came to me and said: “I was called by God to the ministry when I was a child. Then I went into a time of confusion, and to this day I have been confused. But today I come to the altar to tell the Lord that I am going to fulfill my vows and obey the calling of the Lord on my life.”

Jonah never became an official backslider. He never quit believing in God, never stopped being a part of God's family. But his heart was far from God's will.

Perhaps you are an active church member and do not consider yourself a backslider. Yet, like Jonah, you have persistently resisted the voice of God. You may even be confused about what the will of the Lord is.

Disobedience will always bring confusion, but obedience will bring clarity. The way to pierce through the fog created by disobedience is to begin to take steps of obedience one at a time.

Have you put some of God's directives on the shelf?

Rise up, O man or woman of God! Align your heart once again with the complete will of God for your life. Reach out to your city for God.

Proclaim the day of salvation to those who need to hear it. Don't let negativity, offenses or excuses prevent you from embracing His will. Be a part of what God is doing in this day in your city.

If you are struggling with being willing to give everything to the Lord, it is because you do not trust the Father who loves you. Remember that God's will is perfect, good and pleasant (see Rom. 12:2).

Grasp this wonderful reminder of the goodness God has for your life: "Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance" (Ps. 16:5-6, NIV).

Sergio Scataglini was formerly a senior pastor in La Plata, Argentina. He currently bases his ministry in South Bend,

Indiana. His book The Twelve Transgressions (Charisma House).