

A little boy was asked what we learn from the story of Jonah and the whale. His answer was, "*People make whales sick.*" Well, that's one thing we can learn from the ancient story of Jonah. People do make whales sick. There are other lessons in this book too, however. **Many sermons have been preached from Jonah on the USELESSNESS OF RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD.** As someone has said, "*You can't ever run that far from God!*" **Of course, they are right.**

Most of you already know that the primary purpose of this famous Fish story is to reveal the greatness of GOD'S LOVE for all people--Jew and Gentile alike. The last words of the book are some of the most beautiful in all the Scriptures. **Jonah wants God to destroy the people of Nineveh but God says to Jonah, "*You have pity on a gourd which you did not plant, which grew up in a night and perished in a night; And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern their right hand from their left.*"**

YES, THIS STORY SHOWS GOD'S UNIVERSAL LOVE. That is the primary lesson of the book of Jonah.

But there is another lesson to be learned here. It is about a GOD WHO IS NOT AFRAID TO CHANGE HIS MIND.

That is an interesting thing about the God of the Old Testament. **He is not a rigid God.** You will remember on one occasion, the great man of faith **Abraham argued with God about the people of Sodom.** God was going to destroy that city because of its great wickedness. Abraham succeeded in getting a pledge from God that He would not destroy the city if as many as ten righteous people could be located there. **Unfortunately, there weren't ten righteous people in Sodom, but at least God was swayed by Abraham's arguments.** THAT IS NOT AN ISOLATED EVENT.

On another occasion, God chose a man named Saul to be the first king of Israel but soon God realized that Saul was not worthy of such responsibility. God changed his mind and had Samuel the prophet anointed David to be the new king of Israel. **YES, THE GOD OF THE O.T. WAS NOT AFRAID TO CHANGE HIS MIND.**

Consider the predicament of Jonah. God gives Jonah the assignment of preaching to the people of Nineveh. **Jonah** is to tell the people of Nineveh that God is going to destroy the city because of their wickedness. Then an amazing thing happens. **All the people of Nineveh repent.** From the king in his palace to the lowly man sweeping the streets, **they all turn from their sin.** When that happens, God changes his mind. He decides not to destroy Nineveh.

This embarrasses Jonah beyond belief. He has told the people of Nineveh that God is going to destroy them. Now God is not going to do it. Jonah feels utterly humiliated—**HE LOOKS LIKE A FOOL.** Besides, he didn't like the people all that much anyway. Angrily he says to God, "*I knew it! I knew that you were that kind of God.*" Jonah is so upset that he goes out and sits on a hillside overlooking Nineveh to mope, he is angry enough to die.

What do you do with a God who changes his mind? Who says he is going to destroy people and then lets them off the hook? **Is God SOFT PARENT, one who cannot follow through on a punishment because his heart is too tender?** **What would make the ALMIGHTY change His mind?**

FOR ONE THING PRAYER SEEMS TO CHANGE GOD'S MIND. Doesn't it? Isn't that why we pray, most of the time, in order to change God's mind? To be sure some prayers are not like that. I like the story of a brother and sister who were playing in the cow pasture when suddenly the old milk cow lost her temper and dashed for the two children. Because she was older and bigger, the sister was able to climb the nearest tree, but Johnny ran for the fence. Perched on a limb, the sister screamed out her advice, "*Run, Johnny! Run!*" As he neared the fence, she yelled, "*Slide, Johnny! Slide!*" He did, but his pants became caught in the barbed wire. Her last bit of advice was, "*Pray, Johnny! Pray!*" The only prayer Johnny had ever heard was his father repeating grace at mealtime, but the old cow was closing in fast and he needed to do something so he used his dad's prayer, "*Lord, we thank thee for that which we are about to receive.*"

I don't know if I could offer a prayer of thanksgiving under those circumstances. I believe that I would be praying that somehow God would change that old cow's disposition.

Sometimes our prayers are prayers of thanksgiving. Sometimes they are supplications for forgiveness. **More often than not, however, WE PRAY FOR GOD TO SOMEHOW CHANGE HIS PLAN.**

Yes, very often, we pray to God for somebody in our life to make changes.

I read recently of a woman whose husband had a serious drinking problem. Even worse, he refused to get any help. This became a serious matter of contention between the two of them. Indeed, their marriage was a nightmare. **Every night this woman prayed that God would change her husband. But no change took place.**

Then her pastor suggested that she change her prayer. Instead of badgering God every night to change her husband, her pastor encouraged her to give God thanks for her husband. After all, he did have some good points. He suggested that she start giving God thanks for her husband and to restrict her prayer to the things for which she was grateful. **When she did that, a change started to occur in their marriage-first with the wife and then the husband.** There was a different climate in the home. Resentment was changed to acceptance. Her acceptance and love helped the husband get his drinking problem under control. **The woman's husband changed when her prayer changed from a prayer of petition to a prayer of thanksgiving.** So often, though, when we pray it is to change God's mind.

IN THE STORY OF JONAH, WE MIGHT ALSO CONCLUDE THAT REPENTANCE CHANGES GOD'S MIND. Nineveh repented and God decided not to destroy the city. We repent and God changes his attitude toward us. **Right?**

Obviously, we all stand in constant need of repentance. One four-year-old named Johnny fashioned his prayer after what he thought he heard in church in the Lord's prayer: **"And forgive us our trash baskets," he prayed, "as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."** We all admit that we have trash in our baskets. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None of us denies that.

And we know that sin is a barrier to our relationship with God. Indeed, sin is brokenness, alienation. **The longer we stay in our sin, the more difficult it is for us to turn to God.**

There is an interesting footnote from history concerning Mithridates, king of Pontus, and a renowned man of letters a century before Christ. Mithridates guarded himself against being poisoned, a favored means of assassination in those days, by gradually acclimating his body to large amounts of poison. It worked. However, later when in despair he decided to commit suicide, he found that his plan had worked too well. No poison in any amount would kill him and he had to order a slave to stab him to death.

SIN IS LIKE THAT!! After a while it becomes such a part of us that we grow numb to the good things God wants to give us. That is why the repentance of one lost soul brings such rejoicing in Heaven.

There is a Hebrew legend about a disobedient angel who plead for God's mercy. God said, ***"I shall not punish you. However, in your atonement, you must bring back from earth the most precious thing in the world."***

The angel began the search. He found a soldier dying of wounds that he received defending his country. The angel caught the last drop of blood and brought it back.

God said, ***"The courage of one who gives his life is precious, but not the most precious thing in the world."***

The angel resumed his quest. Warily he roamed the earth until he came upon a nurse dying of a disease, who in her infirmary, was nursing a child back to health. God said, ***"The selfless devotion of one who saved the life of a child is very precious, but it also is not the most precious."***

The downcast angel continued to wander. One day he saw a farmer prepared to kill a man who was stealing his cattle. The farmer, his gun ready, stood at the window of the thief's cottage, watching as he kissed his children good night and tucked them into bed. At that moment the would-be killer remembered his own children and lowered his gun. He shuddered to think that he had been on the verge of destroying the happiness of this home, and a tear rolled down his cheek. The angel caught that tear and brought it to the Throne of Glory.

God accepted the tear with rejoicing. God smiled and said, "*you are fully pardoned, for there is nothing more precious than a tear of repentance.*"

Repentance is important. But let me ask. Do any of these things really change God's mind?

LET ME SUGGEST THAT MATURE FAITH UNDERSTANDS THAT IT IS NOT GOD'S MIND THAT CHANGES---BUT OURS.

You see. Jonah missed the point. *JONAH HEARD "JUDGEMENT" WHEN GOD HAD INTENDED "MERCY."*

It was never God's purpose that Nineveh be destroyed. It was God's will that Nineveh recognize its need for repentance.

Jonah would have done well to remember the second part of Johnny's prayer: "*Forgive us our trash baskets, as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.*" This sentiment is the thread that is woven through the entire BIBLE. Read Jonah's story in light of John 3:17 about Jesus' purpose for coming into the world. "*For the Son came into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.*" That is always God's will, from the Old Testament to the New. **Here's the problem with a lot of pop theology: IT PRESENTS A GOD WHO IS 'CONDEMNING, NOT A GOD WHO IS 'FORGIVING.'**

SO, IT IS WITH PRAYER. One day I hopped in a taxi and we took off for the airport. We were driving in the right lane when suddenly a black car jumped out of a parking space right in front of us. My taxi driver slammed on his brakes, skidded, and missed the other car by just inches! The driver of the other car whipped his head around and started yelling at us. My taxi driver just smiled and waved at the guy. And I mean, he was really friendly. So, I asked, "**Why** did you just do that? This guy almost ruined your car and sent us to the hospital!"

This is when my taxi driver taught me what I now call, "**The Law of the Garbage Truck.**" He explained that many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger, and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they need a place to dump it and sometimes they'll dump it on you.

Don't take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well, and move on. Don't take their garbage and spread it to other people at work, at home, or on the streets. Then he said, "*The bottom line is that successful people do not let garbage trucks take over their day. Life's too short to wake up in the morning with regrets, so...Love the people who treat you right. Pray for the ones who don't. Life is ten percent what you make it and ninety percent how you take it!*"

This then is the conclusion of the matter. **GOD'S "LOVE" FOR US IS "UNCHANGING."** *In life, it is we who need to CHANGE—AND IT IS WE WHO NEED TO LOVE.* Jonah learned THIS LESSON while brooding in resentment over God's kind act toward the city of Nineveh. It was here that we learned that....

IT WAS NOT GOD WHO NEEDED A "CHANGE" OF MIND, BUT JONAH.

That is our greatest need, too, to bring our lives into such harmony with the love and purpose of God THAT HIS PLAN IS OUR PLAN.

What do we learn from the book of Jonah? "*That people make whales sick?*" Yes. But really, actually, that the mature believer is one who seeks to bring his or her life into line with the purposes of God. AMEN.