

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

PROPHET JONAH lived some 800 years before the birth of Christ. The Book of Jonah begins with God instructing him to go to the city of Nineveh in Assyria to warn the people that if they did not change their sinful ways, they would be destroyed. But Jonah does not obey God – he gets onto a ship and heads in the opposite direction.

While at sea, a terrible storm blows in, threatening to overturn the boat. Jonah knows that is a direct result of God being angry with him for his disobedience. He asks the sailors to throw him in the water, and he is swallowed by a great fish. Immediately, the storm subsides.

Jonah spends 3 day and 3 nights inside the whale. He prays fervently to God, expressing his sorrow for not following the Lord's command. He vows that if he were delivered from the belly of the whale, he would now obey. God is merciful to Jonah. He causes the whale to spit him out and He commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn them of their impending doom. This time, Jonah obeys, declaring to the people that within 40 days they would all be destroyed by God because of their sinfulness.

When the King hears Jonah's words, he immediately takes off his royal robes and puts on a sackcloth garment. He orders his subjects to do the same, calling upon them to pray and fast.

Amazingly, Jonah is now upset because God doesn't destroy the people of Nineveh! In his mind, they don't deserve God's mercy. Jonah goes to the outskirts of town, builds a small shelter and waits for God to change His mind. The climate in Nineveh is brutally hot, so God causes a plant with large leaves to grow on the top of this shelter to shield Jonah from the sun. The next day, He cause the plant to wither and die, and the scorching sun is once again beating down on Jonah. God then says to him: "Your are angry because I caused a single plant to die. And yet, you didn't want me to fell sorry for an entire city of 120,000 who needed to be taught the difference between right and wrong?"

The behavior of Jonah is typical of ours. He expects God to be merciful to him, but he becomes judgmental of God's response to others in need of forgiveness. The lesson is clear: If we expect forgiveness, we must be willing to show it.