

Jonah (Abbreviated Version)

I am Jonah. You have probably heard my story. And if you think about it, you ought to be glad that YOUR life history is not written in the Bible! You see, I was probably the most successful missionary the world has ever seen, but at the same time I was a personal spiritual disaster.

First of all, I did not want to go. You see, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians tortured and killed in the most heartless manner and provoked terror wherever they went.

I had no sympathy for them. God was not being reasonable, so I ran. I bought a ticket to the other side of the world. I got aboard the ship and breathed a sigh of relief as it pulled away from the pier. You know the rest of the story -- confidence in my plan was gradually eroded as the weather turned dangerous. But still I thought, "To die is also to escape." So when the sailors wondered who I was and what I was doing, I told them that I served the God who made heaven and earth (and controlled the wind and seas, of course) and that I was running away from him.

The fleeting thought crossed my mind that even as I attempted to get them to cooperate in my "sailor assisted suicide," I was being an evangelist. Maybe God had picked the right person after all, but it didn't matter because they were going to throw me overboard.

As I sank into the turbulent sea, out of the blurry wetness I noticed two things. The surface of the sea above me became like glass as I sank beneath it and I saw the sailors fall on their knees at the rail of the ship. My first -- and I truly believed last -- evangelistic campaign had been a success. But at the same time, from below came a darkness that suddenly engulfed me.

I had been swallowed whole by a huge monster of the sea. And that it had air in its belly I can surely attest -- smelly foul air -- but I lived, much to my disappointment.

Finally, my stubbornness was broken. I called to God in honest and humble prayer. The monster vomited me out upon the beach, then departed in relief. All who transport me seem to find comfort only when getting rid of me. When I got to Nineveh, apparently my reputation had preceded me. The story of the storm and the ship, the sea creature and my miraculous survival, all had traveled very fast.

I must say, I liked the message I was charged to deliver. If I had known what it was at the beginning, I probably would have jumped at the chance to say to that evil city, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed." I proclaimed it with no compassion and must have been frightfully convincing because from the king on down, the people repented and turned to the Lord.

I should have marveled at the Lord's ability to soften their hearts of stone, but instead I was furious. I had desperately wanted to see revenge taken on those cruel people and was waiting to see what method God would use. I had read of the destruction of Sodom and the plagues of Egypt. I had a ring side seat for a spectacular show.

But God did the unexpected, to me at least. He had mercy. It shouldn't have been unexpected because he had shown mercy to me. He forgave the people because they had turned humbly to him.

Can we learn from the lives of others? I hope you learn from mine. Don't do as I did. But also remember that even if you do, God will turn your rebellion into a tool for His kingdom.