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## A Whale of a Tale PART 1

What a whale of a tale! Jonah's story is! How does Jonah end up in the belly of big fish? Jonah's God's prophet. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. Nineveh's Assyria's capital. Assyria's an empire filled with mega-mean, nasty and very brutal, ruthless people. Jewish prophet Jonah and all of Israel, all God's people hated the Assyrians. 50 years earlier, the Assyrians obliterated the Jews in war. Assyria carried off God's people to be their slaves. Exiled Jews hated their Assyrian captors. They wanted God to destroy their Assyrian enemies. To understand Israel's hatred we'd have to take all the fear and hatred we've ever felt toward our national enemies (like the Japanese after Pearl Harbor or the radical extreme, Muslim terrorist after 9-11) Still, God told Jonah: "go to Nineveh! Tell these people their mighty city is doomed for what they'd done. God's calling Jonah to save the very people he hates! For Jonah that's a crisis of faith. Ever had one of those? Do we run from God and our enemies or follow God and be forced to face enemies? Got any enemies you're avoiding?"

Avoiding difficulty's not an uncommon human behavior! But, God's call on our lives is a call to forgive even our worst enemies. And, isn't it true? God's call usually upsets our lives and our priorities with God's plans and priorities! Jonah didn't wanna go to Nineveh. Helping the hated, uh, no thank you, God! How could God be so merciful? To foreigners? To the hated? Jonah couldn't fathom how God chose mercy over justice! The Assyrians deserved punishment not mercy. Yeah, Jonah knew God "is a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" but, he'd been just as happy if Nineveh'd gone up in flames. Jonah might have said the right thing but does he do the right thing? No! He does what any of us do when faced with something hard but necessary! He runs the other way! God calls us to forgive someone who's wronged us. We run the other way. Avoiding's just easier! Feels better holding that grudge than facing the issue and doing the hard work of forgiveness. Like God called Jonah, God calls us to stand for what's right but not necessarily popular! Sometimes, it's just easier going with the flow than making waves? But, God calls us to enter the difficulty; to sacrifice for every other's well-being, even our enemies! What would you do? Ignore it? Run the other way? Live your own life? Or, would you be willing to get involved in the real mess of loving others, even an enemy? Jonah opts to get as far away from God and Nineveh as fast as possible. Jonah buys passage on a ship headed a 1000 miles away from Nineveh. Some say Jonah's survival instinct kicked in. In his head God was sending him on an Assyrian suicide mission. So, Jonah heads in the exact opposite direction. He catches a ship at the port city, Joppa and heads for Tarshish. In Bible times Tarshish was like the end of the world. On their way a storm catches them. God sends a terrible storm. The ship almost sinks; remember it's a ship that's owned and operated by foreigners. The storm made the crew frantic! They're throwing cargo overboard to make the ship lighter so it would ride higher in the sea. O, they tried unsuccessfully to steer the ship to shore. And, tucked in the back of these sailor's minds was the notion that the gods sent this fierce storm as a punishment. So, the sailors cast lots to find the one who'd angered the gods. Who angered the gods? Jonah. Jonah admits he's guilty and begs them to throw him overboard. Surely, his sacrifice will appease the gods and stop the storm. And, that's just what they did. That's when the Lord arranges for a giant fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah ends up stuck in the belly of the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Ever wonder? Did this really happen?

Some Bible experts say the story's fiction, like one of Jesus' parables, a God story with a God moral and message. It reads more like a parable than a prophecy! We also know that Jews in Jonah's day weren't seafarers they're sea fearers. They were shepherds with a preference for grass under their feet. Some Bible experts say Jonah could never survive 3 days swimming stomach acid. Others suggest Jonah stayed in the fish's huge oral cavity until he got spit out. Others say it really happened because Jonah was a real person in history. Read 2nd Kings chapter 14. Still, extensive records that survived from Nineveh mention nothing of Jonah's visit or any spiritual awakening. We might never know. All we know is Jonah's in a world of hurt because Jonah's not listening to God. And, what do we do when we're in a world of hurt? Of course, we pray. Why do we have to be up to our eyes in fish guts to pray! If we've ever walked through death's shadowy valley; if we've ever suffered deep anguish, felt helplessly alone or cut off from friends, family or God, we pray, too. "In our distress we call to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead we call for help, and you listen to our cry. You, O, LORD my God, you've brought my life up from the pit and three days later from the belly of a big fish, Jonah's spit up onto dry land, where God's waiting to say go to Nineveh! God answers Jonah prayer by

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commanding the fish to spit Jonah out on the beach. Truth be told: Jonah's a disobedient prophet and the pagan sailors are faithful. The foreigners honor God; God's prophet Jonah does NOT. But, clearly, God's not finished with Jonah. What do you believe? Did Jonah survive 3 days and nights in the belly of a big fish; or, are you in the has to be poetry boat, like a parable; not meant to be a historical account but more like a short story about God? Regardless of what we believe. More difficult than believing Jonah could survive in the belly of a big fish is believing that God cares about brutal, hated enemies who destroy God's people. God's grace extends to EVERYONE? Jonah may know God well; but, he certainly doesn't like God's way of doing things. We'd never do that, would we? Surely, we'd do better than Jonah. We'd NEVER restrict the scope of God's concern to ONLY our kind of people?

## A Whale of a Tale PART 2

God gives Jonah a second chance. By now, Jonah realizes God's never going to let up; so Jonah faces the despised foreigners. He goes to Nineveh and tells the people of this powerful city they'll be destroyed in forty days because they're wicked. Most kings, prime ministers and presidents, including our own – wouldn't take that too well nor would they believe Jonah. Most leaders would NEVER publicly acknowledge any wicked leadership. Jonah being swallowed and spit up by a big fish, isn't the biggest miracle in this Old Testament story. The biggest miracles are the evil hearts of those from the evil city Nineveh that turn to the Lord from a disobedient Prophet Jonah who finally shares God's message. The people of Nineveh are obedient. God's prophet was disobedient. Think about it. Their response is unusual to say the least! Jonah condemned their hostility. The Assyrians could've dismissed his warning. They could've claimed he wasn't in his right mind, mentally ill even. The people in power could've seen Jonah as undermining their authority. Jonah could have been killed. But that's not what happened. The evil people of Nineveh believed Jonah. They see Jonah as the deliverer of God's message. It's a miracle! Foreign, heathen, pagan enemies and king listen to Jonah. The entire city repented! Their change of heart, changes God's heart. God spared 120,000 Ninevites. Foreigners pleasing God by their repentance was a hard pill for Jonah to swallow. Just like this whale of a tale might be a hard pill for us to swallow.

But, we can't miss all the messages this story has for us today. It's a story about racial tolerance. God's the God of all people. God loves Nineveh as much as Israelites; and, Muslims as much as Americans. So, who do you despise and distrust? Can you see how all are important to God? O, if we could all be like Jonah and allow God to break down the barriers we build between us and our enemies?

The story's also about saying "yes" to God's call. Where is your Nineveh? What situation in your life is God calling you to enter rather than run away? It's obvious! We can't hide! God's persistent. God doesn't take "no" for an answer. God's call always speaks forgiveness to our conscience. When it's a God tug we can run but we can't hide. The story's also about spiritual humility. Jonah finally learned it. Can you imagine how pleased God would be with us if we were more spiritually humble? If we just admitted we're not God and we grew past our need to control outcomes? How about we just submit to God? "Not my will God, but your will be done"?

Finally, the story speaks about God's true nature. God's a merciful God; a God of second chances. God gave Jonah a second chance. God will let us flee and fail; once, twice, seven times seventy; and, God will always call us back. God knows how hard it is for us to put our ideas aside to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God! My friends, what difficult situation in your life are you avoiding? Pray about it. God hears your prayers! Go to your Nineveh, not with fear and hatred, but with faith and steadfast courage. God's a forgiving God. God's justice is not retribution and punishment. We'll never make something broken whole again by breaking more stuff. Breaking stuff's what punishment does. God's justice heals. God's justice makes things right even for the ones who shattered our lives in the first place. Do you hear God calling you to forgive your enemies? We don't take any journey of forgiveness alone. God transforming powerful love goes with us to our Nineveh's. And, when we go with God, we emerge victorious with Him. If it can happen in Nineveh; forgiveness can happen in our relationships too! My friends, God's got whatever your Nineveh is because God's got you!