

SPIRITUAL CAT SCANS

JONAH

Judge Will O’Roarty serves the good citizens of Redmond, Washington by meting out justice. Several years ago the judge had just sentenced a defendant, Larry Key, to 60 days in jail on a Drunk Driving conviction.

That’s when Key bolted. He dashed for the door and escaped from the courtroom. What he didn’t expect was the response of Judge O’Roarty...

The judge leaped over the bench and chase Key out of the courthouse. He stayed in hot pursuit – *his judicial robes flapping in the breeze.*

The judge chased him into a supermarket where Key was arrested and returned to court. O’Roarty tacked on 9 months to Key’s 60 day sentence.

Proving, **you can’t outrun the long legs of the law...** And our book today proves **you can’t outrun the long legs of the Lord.** You can’t duck God.

Jonah was a man who learned the hard way you can’t run from God.

The book begins, **“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”**

The name “*Jonah*” means “*dove*” - but by nature Jonah was more a hawk. Jonah was extremely nationalistic. He was very pro-Israeli.

Jonah believed strongly, and rightly, that the Hebrews were God’s chosen people, and were destined to rule over all other nations.

This is why Jonah’s first assignment from God had been a joy...

2 Kings 14:25 states of King Jeroboam, “He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah...” Jonah predicted victory and expansion for Israel.

Judgment on the Gentiles – blessing to the Jews – this was a prophecy right up Jonah’s alley. Here was a *prophecy that fit Jonah’s prejudice.*

But now “*the word of the LORD*” comes to Jonah with a different kind of request. He’s told to go beyond Israeli borders and call Nineveh to repent.

And here’s the problem - Jonah loved God, but he *hated Ninevites.*

Jonah was a spiritual bigot. He understood Israel was God’s *chosen people* – but that doesn’t mean there isn’t room in God’s heart for *other people*. God loved *Ninevites* just as much as He loved *Israelites.*

It reminds me of the Chinaman and the Jew eating lunch in a deli. With no provocation at all, the Jew walks over and punches the Chinaman.

The Chinese fellow shouts, “*What’s that for?*” The Jew answers, “*Pearl Harbor.*” The Chinaman can’t believe it, “*We had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor. That was the Japanese.*” The Jew shrugs, “*It doesn’t matter... Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese... you’re all the same to me.*”

Moments later the Chinese man walks over, and cold-cocks the Jew. He picks himself up off the ground and asks, “*What in the world was that for?*” The Chinaman answers, “*The Titanic.*” The Jew scratches his head, “*I don’t get it. What did Jews have to do with the sinking of the Titanic?*”

The Chinese fellow tells him, “*Goldberg, Feinberg, Iceberg – they’re all the same to me.*” At times racial prejudice is just that irrational.

Somewhere along the line Jonah copped the attitude that the Jews were better than everyone else. In Jesus’ day, some of the rabbis taught that God created the Gentiles as nothing more than kindling to stoke the flames of hell. Like Jonah, they hated anyone who was not a Jew.

When will we learn that racial bigotry is an affront to God? It narrows, and restricts, and puts limits on God’s grace. It shrinks God’s heart to one group – my group. Prejudice is the ultimate selfishness.

Once, a lady in our church told me, “Prejudice isn’t a *skin problem, it’s a sin problem.*” And it’s true. Prejudice is *the pinnacle of pride*. To think that just because you’re not like me, you’re inferior – is sheer heresy.

Prejudice is a sin against God’s love and creativity.

Jonah was a bigot, but there may’ve been reasons for his hatred of the Assyrians. Most of us reject the kind of *irrational prejudice* that occurred in the deli between the Jew and Chinaman, *but seldom is bigotry so simple*.

Racial prejudice is so prevalent because it gets more personal...

The Assyrians had the most heinous, brutal, cruel, bloodthirsty army to ever roam the earth. The Assyrians were *a sword with no conscience*.

After conquering a village they would hold a man down on the ground - reach into his mouth - and rip his tongue out by its roots. They amputated arms and legs - hacked off feet - plucked out eyes – cut off lips and ears.

They would set fire to a man’s wife and children before his very eyes.

An Assyrian trademark was to set a pile of skulls outside the city gate to remind those who were left what would happen if they rebelled. Often the Assyrians would skin their prisoners alive. It’s believed many of Hitler’s crimes against the Jews were borrowed from the ancient Assyrians.

Now, 2Kings 14:25 says Jonah was from a town called “**Gath Hopher.**” It was a Galilean village about five miles northeast of Nazareth.

This was significant, for during Jonah’s lifetime the Galilee was the site of terrible atrocities... Inscriptions in the ruins of Nineveh speak of military forays into the Galilee where Assyrian war parties would pillage and raid – just enough to intimidate Israel’s King. The king would pay blackmail money, and buy a few more years of protection from the Assyrians.

What if one of those raids occurred in Gath Hopher?

What if you lived in Gath Hopher and one day a band of Assyrians rode in and set fire to your fields - impaled your father on a spear - flayed your brother with a knife - burned your two sisters before your very eyes...

God says, “**Love your enemies...**” *Would you love these Assyrians?*

All of a sudden, prejudice takes on a whole new meaning.

When you’re victimized by someone of a different group, you tend to take out your anger on other members of that same group. It’s not right, but it happens. *Could this have set-off Jonah’s prejudice?* Its possible Jonah had been violated by Assyrians – or knew someone who had.

And Jonah knew God. If he preached to Assyria, and they repented – it would be just like God to forgive these

wretched people, and treat them as His own people, Israel. *That would be more than Jonah could stomach.*

Jonah wanted to see Assyria *slaughtered*, not saved. He prayed for her *destruction* not *deliverance*. Jonah hated Assyria - *to hell with Nineveh!*

Here's a problem with following God... **God doesn't hate the people we hate.** The person who cheated you out of your money – who violated your dignity and honor – who ripped off your innocence... God hates their sin, but still loves the person and wants to forgive. *What do you want?*

This is where prejudice gets real personal – where it can grow toxic!

God loves your ex-spouse, do you? God loves your alcoholic mom, do you? God loves your abusive dad, do you? God loves your annoying neighbor, do you? God loves your unsympathetic boss, do you?

What if God called you to share the Gospel with the person you hate - *to bring to heaven the person you've sent to hell a million times under your breath?* You have more in common with Jonah than you think!

Jonah decides he doesn't want to cooperate with God's missionary efforts to Nineveh. He turns down the assignment. Jonah walks 20 miles to the port of Joppa. Nineveh was east, so Jonah buys a one-way ticket westward to the farthest destination he can find – the land of *Tarshish*.

It was the equivalent of a slow boat to China. Jonah is on the run.

Verse 3 tells us **“Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”** He tries the impossible - to flee from God who's everywhere.

Jonah sets sail for Tarshish, but he never makes his destination.

Verse 4 tells us God stirs up a violent storm at sea that threatens to break apart the ship. Cargo gets thrown overboard to lighten the load.

The captain and crew panic...That's when someone reminds the captain of the prophet who's on board. He's asleep in the hull. The captain rebukes Jonah in verse 6, **“What do you mean sleeper? Arise, call on your God...”**

Members of the crew figure the storm is the result of a passenger's sin. Apparently, God knew someone was carrying extra baggage. The crew members cast lots to determine the culprit... and it points to Jonah.

In verse 8 they grill him with questions. It's a tribunal at sea. They finally ask him what needs to happen to stop the storm. Jonah answers in verse 12, **“Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”** Note, Jonah is so stuck in his prejudice, he never thinks to change course for Nineveh.

The sailors don't want to toss Jonah, but God leaves them no choice. Every time they try to make it to shore the storm grows more intense.

Finally, they pray, and throw Jonah overboard. And the moment his body hits the water, verse 15 tells us **“the sea ceased from its raging.”**

The crew members are so impressed, they worship God. Even in his disobedience Jonah's missionary service begins... The sailors realize Jonah's God is the Creator and Controller of the sea and the winds.

Jonah 1 starts with a **“great city”** - includes a **“great wind”** - and ends with a **“great fish.”** Verse 17 tells us, **“Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”** This is where the story gets *fishy...*

How can a man be swallowed by a fish, and survive three days and three nights in its belly? Let me give you a few possibilities to ponder...

In verse 17 the Hebrew word translated **“prepared”** implies a special, unique preparation. God didn't just pick the biggest of a school of fish, and say **“You're it.”** The word means **“to carefully design and weigh.”**

The Jewish rabbis taught that God created this particular fish on the 5th day of His original creation - for the unique privilege of chauffeuring Jonah.

It swam the seas for thousands of years waiting on the appointed time.

Here's another thought, a baby is conceived in his mother's womb. God provides for that baby to float, eat, grow, and survive for 280 days in a sack of fluid. Now don't think I'm dumb enough to compare a pregnant woman to a whale. *I'm stupid, but not that stupid. Besides, I value my life.*

But if God can keep a baby alive in a woman's belly for 40 weeks, why can't He engineer a way to sustain Jonah in a whale's belly for 3 days?

Today's navy has nuclear subs that generate their own air and water - and can stay submerged indefinitely... Why then is it hard to believe that God can create a fish capable of carrying one man for 3 days?

Here's another thought... *Since whales are the largest animals currently living in the sea* we assume this fish was a whale. But it could've been a one of kind creature – a now extinct dinosaur. Perhaps God created an animal with a cavity off its digestive track designed just for Jonah.

Even if this fish was a whale the story is still not impossible.

The average sperm whale has a mouth 20' long, 15' high, and 9' wide – larger than most bedrooms. Whalers have found whole, man-sized squid and sharks inside these whales. Though it would be stifling in a whale's

stomach – 104-108 degrees - there would be plenty of air to breathe.

The gastric juices in a whale’s stomach would affect the pigment in a man’s skin – but the chemicals don’t digest living flesh. If they did, they would eat out a whale’s own stomach. A man could survive in its belly.

There are a number of reports among whalers of fellow fishermen who have fallen into the ocean only to be found later, alive inside a whale. The stories are hard to confirm, but they’re within the realm of possibility.

Here’s my point, in 1:9 Jonah refers to God as “**the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.**” If God makes the sea – and the billions of teeming life that inhabit the earth’s oceans – then He can certainly create a fish capable of capturing and carrying Jonah for 72 hours.

Here’s a final suggestion... Regardless of what swallowed Jonah it’s possible he died – drowned in the sea. His dead body was preserved inside the fish - then he was resurrected and spit up on the shore.

Notice in 2:2 Jonah prays from the belly of the fish, but look at what he says in the last line, “**Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice...**” Sheol was an OT name for Hades, the abode of the dead.

It could be Jonah was speaking metaphorically - *the fish was a hell on earth*. Or his words could be taken literal.

Jonah actually died and repented from Hades where God gave him a second chance.

Remember in Matthew 12:40, Jesus said, “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jesus literally died - went to Hades where He preached to the captives - then rose from the dead on the third day... And He compares his journey into the afterlife to Jonah’s experience... Perhaps Jonah actually died in the sea, or in the belly of the fish, and was resurrected from the dead when the whale spit him out on the shore. It’s another possibility.

Chapter 2 records Jonah’s prayer of repentance.

Apparently, *total darkness, stifling heat, boiling gastric juices, slimy substances, a seaweed body wrap* – provide a person with an excellent opportunity to ponder the error of their ways, and to plot a new course.

It reminds me of the young man who came to the elder of the village.

He said he wanted to know God. The older man took him to the river and held his head underwater for a long time. The young man fought and gasp for air. Finally, the elder let him up, and told him, “Son, when you become as desperate for God as you were for air, then you’ll find Him.”

It was in such a state of desperation that Jonah broke through his own prejudices and came to a place of humility and repentance.

Read with me, Jonah's prayer in 2:6-9, "You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

We're told in verse 10, "So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." Jonah gets a new lease on life, and a second crack at ministry. He stops *running from God* – and now he's *running with God*.

Jonah comes full circle. You can't escape the calling and will of God. If you're on the run from God's will, trust me, there's a fish prepared for you.

Let me ask you, *what's your Nineveh?*

What's the one thing you've said you just won't do? The one place you just won't go? The one mission you just won't accept? The one person you just won't love? Is your prejudice more important than God's will?

Chapter 3 begins on a wonderful note, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time..." God is the God of second chances.

God tells Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." And this time the prophet obeys.

Jonah made the three day journey to Nineveh. He stands on the street corner, and cries out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Sounds simple, but recall Nineveh was "a great city". It probably had a population of a million-plus. It was the capitol of a ruthless empire.

Imagine a Jew in Tehran, on an Iranian street corner, heralding the truth that Muhammad is a false prophet, and Jesus is the only answer! Now you get an idea of what the prophet Jonah had been called to do.

But notice Jonah's message. He says, "Yet forty days..." The Assyrians must've thought, "If God is bent on our destruction - why wait 40 days?"

Jonah didn't say it, but the Assyrians assumed God was giving them time to repent of their sin, and turn to Him. Their perception paid off!

Verse 5 tells us all the Ninevites – from the king to the commoner - believed God, and repented of their sin. They called a national fast, humbled themselves in sackcloth and ashes, and cried for mercy!

Chapter 3:10 tells us the result, "Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it."

In fact, you could make a case that this was the single greatest spiritual awakening in history. At Pentecost 3000 souls were saved. Yet in Nineveh, a whole city repented and turned to God. And here's the amazing truth, God did it through a reluctant, prejudiced prophet named Jonah!

It proves, **“God uses us more in spite of us, than because of us.”**

I believe there were four factors to Jonah's phenomenal success...

Factor # 1, **the time was right.**

The Assyrian king at that moment was a man named, Assurdan III. His reign was colored by several natural disasters people interpreted as signs or omens. An eclipse, earthquake, famine, and several military defeats had primed the pump in the people's heart for Jonah's message.

Factor # 2, **the prophet was white.**

My skin is light brown. I'm *manila* – but Jonah was *vanilla*. His skin was bright white. Imagine Jonah when he entered Nineveh... He looked like a prune, and the gastric juices had bleached his skin. They thought he was a Jewish albino. And he smelled. Something was fishy about this guy. He definitely attracted a crowd. Folks came to see the puked-up prophet!

Factor # 3, **they heard of his flight.**

In Luke 11:30 Jesus said Jonah was “**a sign to the Ninevites.**” Evidently, his story was well known. The Assyrians knew of his racial prejudice – yet God loved them enough to employ unusual means to overcome the prophet’s reluctance. It was obvious God loved Nineveh!

It’s also interesting, Assyria worshipped the fish-god, *Oannes* – and that a fish threw Jonah up on the shore may’ve caused the Assyrians to initially think he was a messenger of *Oannes*. If so, it would’ve provided Jonah an immediate platform from which to teach about the one, true God of Israel.

The time was right, the prophet was white, they heard of his flight - and factor # 4, **the Spirit of God showed His might.** This is the case with all spiritual awakenings. God uses desperate circumstances - and fired- up, puked-out prophets – but ultimately all revivals are works of God’s Spirit.

In 2:9 Jonah said at his conversion, “**Salvation is of the LORD.**”

No man comes to God, and embraces Jesus, unless God’s Spirit draws him. That was true of Jonah - of Nineveh - and of me and you. Every time a man is saved for eternity it’s involves the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4 proves just how deep-seated was Jonah’s prejudice. Verse 1 reveals an unbelievable fact, “**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.**” *Jonah preached... people repented... and he’s upset?*

Say what? Check out his complaint in verses 2-3, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm.”

Jonah is saying, *“I knew this would happen! This is why I ran! I knew if those bloody Assyrians gave God half a reason He’d show mercy and forgive them.”* Jonah still hated the Assyrians. He’d wanted fire to fall.

Rather than rejoice over Nineveh’s repentance, Jonah was resentful.

In fact, he’s so bummed he wants to die. In verse 3 he prays, “Now O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” How can anyone be this bigoted? Jonah was one sick pup!

Jonah still hopes God will rain down fire on Nineveh, so he goes outside the city, and builds a hut to shade him from the blistering sun. Summer temps around the site of ancient Nineveh can reach 125 degrees.

Jonah is planning to settle in, and watch God’s fireworks.

But 4:6 tells us what happened. “And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.”

It was probably a palm. They grow 8-10 feet tall with elephant ear leaves and tender stalks. The palm grew overnight to provide Jonah supernatural shade. He didn't deserve the blessing, but Jonah was glad and grateful.

Yet as quickly as God blessed Jonah, He removed the blessing.

The next day God sent a worm that ate the palm, and an east wind that blew on Jonah. The plant and the prophet wilted from the elements. And once again, he despairs of life. Every time Jonah doesn't get his way he curls up and asks to die. He's a spoiled brat – he's *the pouting prophet*.

Here's Jonah... he hates *people*, but he falls in love with a *plant*.

It's interesting, how in the absence of human relationships some folks get attached to a dog, or cat, or plant. I had a neighbor - like Jonah – who loved her lawn. She alienated all the kids in the neighborhood because they ran through her silly yard. She didn't want her grass matted down.

Instead of caring about people Jonah became attached to a plant. He cared more about his palm, than the souls of the people of Nineveh.

When Minnesota Twins slugger, Harmon Killebrew, was inducted into Major League Baseball's Hall of Fame, he told a story about his dad.

The elder Killebrew would play pitch with his two boys in the front yard.

On occasion, Harmon's mom would complain about them wearing out the grass. Mr. Killebrew would remind her, "Honey, we're raising boys, not grass." Always remember its people – not objects - that matter.

Here's the Christmas lesson from the book of Jonah...

This year don't get caught up in the shopping, and gift giving, and the decorating, and the party-going... and overlook the souls of the people around you. *Jonah's plant* could just as easily be your *Christmas tree*.

The Lord rebukes Jonah in verse 10, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left - and much livestock?"

Jonah mourns a plant, while he complains about God's pity and mercy toward people. Notice the mention of those who can't tell their right from their left – *or the children*. God is trying to shake some sense in Jonah...

He's saying, "Think of the innocent kids who'll grow up pagans, and idolaters - and go to hell - if I don't deliver them and forgive their city."

Hey, only two items on Earth will live for all eternity – **God's Word** and **the souls of people**. This is why

people matter. This Christmas, make sure you don't get attached to an ornament - and miss the will of God.

Your plant can be a career, or hobby, or talent, or ambition, or pet - your plant might be your plants - but never let an object or animal become more important than the people in your life. God loves people, and He wants us to love them too. Unlike Jonah, be a *people person*, not a *plant person*.

What eventually happened to Jonah is a mystery. Archeologists have found a mound near the ancient site of Nineveh. The Arabs call it, "*Nebi Yunas*" which means "*the prophet Jonah.*" The area is so revered by the locals the archeologists are prohibited from exploring the Tel.

The mound is believed to be the site of Jonah's tomb. If true, it indicates Jonah planted himself in Nineveh, and spent the rest of his life teaching the Assyrians about the one, true God. It's nice to think Jonah overcame his prejudices. He recognized the mercy and grace God had shown him - then loved the Ninevites with that same kindness.

The book of Jonah is full of miracles - *the storm at sea, the great fish, the overnight plant, the hungry worm, and the sudden east wind.*

But the greatest miracle by far is when God transforms a *bigot* into a *big-hearted person*. We can only hope that happened to Jonah...

And I pray that it also happens in you...