

The Message of Jonah

Obsession.

Not just a fragrance from Calvin Klein. It's what drives Sonia Young, a Tennessee woman - who has a passion for purple - to dress in purple, live in a purple house and drive a purple car. The Purple Lady, she's called.

Obsession. It's what drives some to build huge banana sculptures or to attempt to cross all of the world's suspension bridges.

Simon & Schuster published a book in 2002 called *The Banana Sculptor, the Purple Lady and the All-Night Swimmer* by Susan Sheehan. It chronicles the lives and adventures of 40 strangely compelling people who have offbeat passion like the "purple lady". It includes stories of Peter Holden, who is attempting to eat at every McDonald's in the United States, and that of a young woman who turns a passion for baking into the winning of more than 3,000 ribbons at the huge Iowa State Fair.

People are passionate about the strangest things.

The author interviews each of their subjects to discover their motivations and the consequences of their obsessions. Jim Dreyer, whose aim is to swim across each of the Great Lakes, admits that his goals don't permit him to have a family or much social interaction, but he seems genuinely satisfied with his purpose in life.

A New York City man ferrets out origins of words and phrases, such as how his hometown became known as "The Big Apple."

Where would the prophet Jonah fit into this collection of odd individuals?

Like these obsessive-compulsives, Jonah also has an obsession - perhaps passion is a better word. It's a passion that will lead him to direct disobedience of the known will of God. It's an obsession that will endanger the lives of others. It's a stubbornness that would withhold the grace of God to a repentant people. It's a passion as strong as anyone's hunger to collect antique postcards, books by author Gore Vidal, pre-canceled stamps, marbles, spy memorabilia or Indochinese military medals.

Jonah's passion is his patriotism that drives him to have an "us vs. them" mentality. He knows that Nineveh is the hammer that will someday shatter Israel into oblivion. Thus, even when God orders him to preach hellfire and brimstone to Nineveh, he refuses. "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city," says the Lord to Jonah, "and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2).

God had a specific message for the Ninevites and He has a specific message for us today too! Let's look at each.

God's Message to the Ninevites – In the story of Jonah, I want you to notice in the book of Jonah that God wanted the Ninevites to not just have the message, but to actually receive the message. He wanted the Ninevites to repent! So God had to prepare Jonah. How did God prepare Jonah?

1. By allowing him to run away. Jonah believed that his position as a Hebrew placed him on some higher relationship with God.
 - a. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be blasted, rather than blessed, by Jehovah, paid back for their evil deeds and wicked ways. He was putting his own happiness, and the good of his own people, above God's call to care for a lost world.
 - b. So Jonah, refusing to go to Baghdad and preach the gospel, refusing to give comfort to a people who needed grace. He goes down instead to Joppa and hops on a ship headed for Tarshish, in the exact opposite direction, determined to flee from the presence of the Lord.

2. By sending a Great Storm
 - a. While out to sea, the ship that Jonah was on, ran into a storm and it looked as if the ship would go down. The violent storm that battered the ship had a supernatural origin. The crew knew that this was no natural storm, and they wanted to know what to do.
 - b. Jonah, however, even in the storm, wasn't willing to admit that this was from God just yet. He needed to be taught a lesson. There's an old Arabian proverb that says "All sunshine makes a desert." He needed to learn to trust God, even in the storm. God wanted him to know that life is not all sunshine, if it were, Jonah's spiritual life would be dry.

3. By showing who was at fault through the Casting of Lots
 - a. The casting of lots was a recognized practice in Old Testament days. The sailors drew lots to find out who is the cause.
 - b. What was the lot? "Basically there were "stones or inscribed tablets were put in a vessel, and having been shaken, were drawn out or cast out" (Davis, Dictionary of the Bible). The throwing of the lot was usually preceded by prayer to God for his direction.
 - c. God ensured that Jonah, as it were, drew "the short straw". He was interrogated by the crew and confessed his faith in "the God of heaven who made the sea and the land."
 - d. Once the lot had fallen on Jonah, Jonah finally got it! He realized that God's hand was in the matter. He didn't catch it in the storm, so God had to prepare him through the casting of lots. Jonah himself told the sailors that their only chance of survival was to throw him over board.

4. By bleaching him

- a. As Jonah hits the water, he is saved when God sends a giant fish.
- b. Have you ever noticed that Fishermen love to tell stories! There was a fisherman named Sir Francis Fox who wrote in 1891 that his whaling crew found a man alive inside of a whale. Here is how Sir Fox describes him: "His skin - where it was exposed to the action of the gastric juice - face, neck and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment (and) never recovered its natural appearance (though otherwise) his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience."
(http://www.grmi.org/renewal/Richard_Riss/evidences/8jonah.html).
- c. Is this story a modern day story of Jonah – or as some people think - a seaman's yarn? I leave you to judge.
- d. But even if Sir Francis Fox was just telling a fib, the point is that Jonah looked like a ghost when he entered Ninevah. No wonder the people listened to his message!
- e. I want you to catch something here: God prepared Jonah's very image so that the message would be heard! He sent the fish, not just to save Jonah, but also to save the Ninevites!

God prepared Jonah for an important message, so what was that message?

God wanted to send a warning to the Ninevites

1. The Ninevites were nasty people. They were the geopolitical axis of evil in their day.
 - a. One of their kings (Ash-urna - sirpal) made a habit of cutting off the hands, feet, noses and the ears of his captives and also put out their eyes and raised mounds of human heads.
 - b. Yet, God called Ninevah a "great city" twice in the book of Jonah. What exactly did God mean by calling Nineveh "that great city" not once, but twice? I am sure that this really got under the skin of Jonah. Yes, Nineveh was wicked, but "great"? It almost sounded like God had a soft spot for those evil Ninevites! How worrisome to Jonah that there was even a remote possibility that God could see potential in the most depraved of Israel's enemies!
 - c. Here's the deal: Jonah was perfectly happy to preach hellfire and damnation to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, because frankly, they deserved it. Horrible people. Nasty habits. They were Israel's longtime enemy, and therefore God's longtime enemy ... right? As long as God pushed the delete key in the end as promised, and served up the obliteration those miserable Assyrians deserved, all would be well, sermon or no sermon.

- d. After all, the Assyrians had humiliated and crushed the Israelites, then stripped them of their culture and their land. Surely God would never forgive them! Surely God could not love them! They had terrorized God's precious chosen people, and frankly, their behavior had far surpassed Israel's on its worst day in terms of sheer offensiveness to the Holy One.
 - e. Jonah is beginning to sense that his life is not, in fact, "all about him," and so he sets out and goes to Nineveh, an exceedingly large city, one that takes three days to hike across. He heads straight into the middle of the city, crying out the words, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (v. 4).
2. This message consists of 8 words in English, but only 4 in Hebrew
 - a. Jonah spent little effort and minimal time on his conversion sermon. The average preacher today spends 8-15 hours on a 20 minute sermon. Jonah spent 2 seconds! "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That's it!
 - b. And can you picture the delivery? Minimal expression and all the enthusiasm of a Ben Stein lecture. Forty days more ... and Nineveh ... shall be ... overthrown. He wanted to school them with a minimum of personal exertion.
 3. Yet the Ninevites repented! Much to Jonah's utter astonishment, the sermon was a breathtaking success! A real life-changer! Out came the sackcloth! Into the fire went all the little statues of fertility gods.
 4. Who knew this whiny excuse for a preacher could move the sorry heathens of Assyria to sing "Just As I Am Without One Plea" en masse? Now Jonah is having a whale of a time because Nineveh repented! In fact, an obelisk was recently dug up that recorded a king who changed from worshipping many gods to one God. This could possibly be the same king of Nineveh who repented at Jonah's preaching.

God had a specific message for the Ninevites and He has a specific message for us today too! He wants us to see that this story in Jonah is not just a cute story that we tell our children, but it has a specific message for each person sitting here today.

1. Don't run away
 - a. Interestingly, Jonah starts from a small seaport near to Jerusalem called Joppa - which is known today as Jaffa.
 - b. Interestingly it was the same Joppa where St. Peter was staying - about 900 years later - when the Lord called him to take the Gospel to the first Gentiles - the house of Cornelius. (Acts 10, 5-48).
 - c. Like Peter, Jonah was called to preach the Gospel of repentance to the Gentiles.

- d. Like Peter, Jonah had to overcome the same prejudices - that grace was only for the Jews and not for the heathen Gentiles.
- e. Jonah, unlike Peter was disobedient in Joppa and took off in exactly the opposite direction - to the other end of the world.

2. Have compassion - God wants us to have compassion for those who are lost. We must remember - no one is beyond grace.

Compassion calls us to change. Often our calling as Christian disciples will mean that God will challenge us to change. And I mean change in all its guises

- Change how we think,
- Change where we are, and
- Change how we act.

Jonah didn't flee because he was scared what the Ninevites might do to him. He fled because he had no compassion towards his enemy Ninevah. He realised that God would forgive them if they repented. Look at what Jonah says at the beginning of Chapter 4:2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

Who is this Jonah? He is the patron saint of anyone who secretly smiles when the high school prom queen shows up at the 25th reunion with 60 extra pounds and her third husband. He is the soul mate of the employee who feels delicious pleasure when the boss is suddenly sacked with fifteen minutes to clear his office. He is the poster child of all who appreciate reading in the newspaper about the "family values" politician who winds up photographed in a hot tub with "a woman not his wife."

Jonah reminds us that even in the community of faith -- and perhaps especially in the community of faith -- we confuse what we hate with what God hates. Do we, like Jonah, find pleasure in hating? Joy in our enemy's misfortune? Do we find ourselves working for our own self-interests rather than God's glory and the growth of the kingdom?

But Jonah provides a new mirror for us to examine ourselves. Jonah presents a painfully clear reflection of slice-of-life malevolence. While war criminals and deranged zealots display glaring, colorful hatefulness for the entire world to scorn, Jonah reminds us that hate also takes shape in souls that appear to be respectable and faithful.

Souls like ours.

It is not at all clear that people like the Purple Lady in the Banana Sculptor book understands what we should really be passionate about. Perhaps she is as confused as Jonah or any of us. She dresses in purple, lives in a purple-themed house, drives a purple car and admits that being

"The Purple Lady" gives her a sense of identity. But where's God in all this purpleness? Where is God in all our passions? Where is God in all our obsessions? Where is God in the busy-ness of our own lives? Jonah reminds that we are challenged to respond to God with our own passions.

Jonah finally gets it ... after the fish spits him up - just like we don't get it sometimes, until life chews us up and spits us out. He realizes that he cannot escape the call of God, not by running toward Tarshish, not by carving The Last Supper out of wood, not by collecting marbles or Noah's arks or talking birds or anything else.

Not that there is anything inherently wrong with any of these pursuits. We may, in fact, find them to be very enjoyable. But our ultimate happiness, our ultimate satisfaction, our ultimate contentment, our ultimate peace is only going to be found in responding to the call of God. That's our purpose in life.

A passion for purple is never going to be enough - for us or for God.

The Bible does not tell us how Jonah's life turns out. I believe that God left that chapter blank because he wants us to put ourselves in Jonah's shoes and write that final chapter with our own lives. We can pen the final chapter in this story whenever we respond to God's call with the gift of our lives.

There's nothing wrong with the color purple. As long as our primary passion is God.

Jonah reminds us that "wickedness" springs not from the fact that you are not like me, or "they" are not like "us." Wickedness ensues when people are not like God, whether those people in question happen to be Ninevites, Serbs, Iraqis, Democrats, Republicans, or any one of us. God's point is that the kingdom must grow, and everybody is invited. Even the obnoxious neighbor who yells at our dog. Even the coworker who stabs people in the back. Even the church leader whose attitude is so self-righteous.

Even those nasty Ninevites. Even us.

God's plan is that everyone will be saved by turning away from wickedness and toward the only God who can free a guy from the belly of a fish, the only God who can transform an entire city of heathens, the only God who can melt hateful hearts.

God persists as the only one who can change us, too.

Jonah's story ends with a question. God tosses one to Jonah, and we never hear the answer: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city (one more time), in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (4:11).

Today, Ninevah is a city of about 100,000 in Iraq - of which about 90% of the present day population are Assyrian Christians and which has three members in the new National Assembly.

One of these members recently said: "We don't want to come under Muslim Law because we are Christians"

God knew what he was doing by calling Jonah 2,800 years ago - but I DON'T get the impression that Jonah DID - but he was obedient in the end!

Could it be that even today God has honored Jonah's preaching by calling the inhabitants of that city Ninevah to be a beacon of Christian Faith in the heart of a Muslim country, Iraq?

The message for us in Jonah is this: God is obsessed with the hearts of all people. He loves everyone! What are you doing to share that love?

Christ died for your sins to share the same message.

John 3:16

Call to Decision