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"Learning From Jonah"

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When I was a 7 or 8-year-old boy, I remember playing one day with my three brothers, and our air rifles. We geniuses were using the air rifles to shoot clods of mud at each other. My oldest brother ended up with a clump of dirt wedged behind his glasses, and I might have had something to do with that. I recall my father taking me aside for a not-so-pleasant discussion. Our conversation took a turn for the worse when he asked me, "What have you learned from this, Wayne?" And I had nothing. I hadn't learned anything yet, and that didn't make my dad very happy.

"What have you learned from this?" Have you ever heard those words? Maybe you've committed some incredible blunder, or gotten yourself into some big mess, and a parent, a spouse, or a teacher wants to know what you've learned from your foolishness.

Today's Bible story of Jonah got me thinking about a similar question. What does a person learn from spending three days sitting in the belly of a big fish?

The Bible tells us that Jonah was ordered by God to go a city called Nineveh, to proclaim his Word to the Ninevites. The people there were wicked and godless; and Jonah wanted nothing to do with them. So he refused God's directive, hopped on a boat, and took off in the opposite direction.

But, the Bible tells us, God sent a violent storm. The boat was about to sink, the sailors were in a panic, and Jonah knew that he was the one responsible. So he told the sailors to throw him overboard; and, when they did, the storm stopped immediately.

Jonah, sinking in the waves, thought he was done for, "*But the LORD appointed a great fish,*" the Bible says, "*to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights*" (Jonah 1:17).

Ugh! What must that experience have been like for Jonah? What did Jonah learn from spending three awful days sitting in the belly of that fish? And what can we Christians learn from our reluctant, ornery, know-it-all friend, Jonah?

Here's the first thing I think Jonah learned: ***God has a purpose for me, and expects my obedience.*** Jonah tried to flee from God's plan in his life; but God snuffed out Jonah's little rebellion. God, who rules mightily over the land, sea, weather, creatures, peoples, and everything in the world -- even the big fish -- had a plan for Jonah to deliver his message, and he didn't take "No" for an answer.

In our lives, too, God has a purpose. You may not be a prophet, like Jonah, but God still has a design for the way he wants you to live. He has a plan for what he wants you to do. The Word of God gives us all specific directions for our lives -- for our marriages, parenting, relationships, and conflicts; for our worship life, prayer life, and stewardship life. God gives us clear-cut guidance regarding the attitudes we ought to have toward our enemies, toward our government, toward the poor and needy. God's Word definitively directs and shapes our lives according to the purposes he has for us.

But, like Jonah, sometimes we say, "No." Sometimes we refuse him. Sometimes we think we know better, don't we? We hop on the ship of disobedience, like Jonah did, fleeing from God, heading in the opposing direction.

God wants you to turn around! He has a purpose for you today, a direction for you to follow this week. It may be big and bold, and out of the box. But it's probably routine and normal, something you already know God wants you to do. You can't run away from what God wants you to do. Don't wait for a big fish to swallow you up! Learn from Jonah! God has a purpose for you, and he expects your obedience.

Here's one more thing that Jonah learned the hard way, something we need to learn, too. Sitting in the fish's belly, Jonah learned that **God has great compassion for those who turn to him, and he wants me to be compassionate, too.**

Now, the first part of that statement, Jonah already knew. From the history of his own people, the Israelites, Jonah was aware that God is quick to forgive those who turn to him. Jonah was afraid that's what would happen if he went to Nineveh and shared God's Word there. Jonah didn't like the Ninevites, so he didn't want them to be forgiven.

But, sitting in the smelly belly of the great fish, Jonah realizes that he's been a great fool. He wakes up to the fact that God is with him, even in his act of rebellion and defiance. He prays to God, and thanks him for saving his life. Jonah pledges -- still somewhat reluctantly -- to follow God's lead. He prays, *"Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:8-10).*

Sounds gross; but not a bad outcome for Jonah. And, yet, if you read the rest of the story -- and I hope you all will this week, chapters 3 & 4 (5 minutes) -- you'll see that God

wanted more from Jonah than for him to just apologize and get on with his assignment. God had showed Jonah compassion, and given him an awesome second chance. Now God wants Jonah to learn to show compassion to others, too.

Our God is a God of second chances. He gave Jonah a break. He gave the Ninevites, and he gives us, second chances, too. And our God would have us do the same for others. Last week, we prayed that God would open our hearts to tolerance, acceptance, and an end to the prejudice in us. This week God is challenging us again, in that same vein.

We need to learn from Jonah. God's Word is for everyone! God's grace is for everyone! God's Son, Jesus Christ, gave his life on the cross, and spent three days in a dark, smelly grave -- not just to pay for our sins, and win our forgiveness, but for all people who turn to him in faith. God's compassion is for everyone who turns to him, and God wants us to be compassionate, too.

May God help his church -- may God help you and me this week -- to learn from the story of Jonah. ***God has a purpose for us, and expects our obedience.*** And ***God has great compassion for those who turn to him, and he wants us to be compassionate, too.*** Amen.