

“The Value of a Soft Heart”

Profiles of Faith #3: Jonah
Read Jonah 1-4

The prophet Jonah can teach us a lot. He was called by God to go and reach out to sinful people. His response is rich with lessons, and most people tend to focus on the idea that although he didn't really want to do it, he ended up submitting to God. That's good stuff, but I want to talk about something I believe was Jonah's greatest asset: he had a soft heart that ended up saving his life in the midst of rebellion.

God came to him and told him to go and reach out to the people in the “great city” of Nineveh. This sounds like a reasonable request from God, except that Jonah flat out didn't want to do it! Nineveh was full of anti-religious, God defying heathens. Their sin was well known to people like Jonah. The prophet Nahum calls them out for sins such as plotting evil against God (Na. 1:11), unusual cruelty in war (Na. 2:12-13, 3:1, 19), prostitution and witchcraft (Na. 3:4), and underhanded business dealings (Na. 3:16). Deep in his heart, Jonah felt like God's mercy was for Israel only, and might have concluded that prosperity for another nation mean calamity to his own. Before we judge Jonah, can't we all agree that we sometimes even struggle with selfishness as it relates to the kindness of God? It is a problem that ails each generation of Christians, no matter how pure we try to keep our heart. It's shameful, but we can tend to be jealous when others prosper spiritually. The classic theologian Clovis Chappell says it best: “It is a very human trait in us to feel that another's advancement is in some way a blow to ourselves. It is equally a human trait to feel that another's downfall and disgrace in some way adds a bit of luster to our own crowns.” *Think about that one.* Jonah was mad at God's compassion to Nineveh, so he rebelled and refused to submit.

Jonah promptly boarded a boat for Tarshish, which happened to be in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh! It is amazing Jonah thought he could actually run away from God! Soon after setting sail a great storm came and pummeled the boat. The crew was in turmoil, but Jonah was down below deck in a “deep sleep.” **This situation is dangerous.** Jonah was no doubt troubled by God's requests, and surely struggled with guilt and restlessness as he contemplated what to do. He had obviously gotten to the point where he could lay his head down and sleep soundly when fully in rebellion against God. If you ever get here, be concerned because your heart is hardening. Chappell also says, “as long as your sin breaks your heart, as long as your disobedience makes you lie awake nights and wet your pillow with tears there is hope for you.” If you are not deeply disturbed and uncomfortable with your sin, get help very quickly. Everything is at stake. If we stay here too long, it gets increasingly harder to respond when God comes to shake us loose. There is something good about the guilt and shame brought on by sin. Be grateful when you feel it.

God did come after Jonah. On the verge of destruction, the crew confronted him. He woke up and saw the reality of his stubbornness. Here's the good thing: his heart was still soft, he hadn't damaged it beyond repair. He looked at these scared men, realized how selfish he'd been, and told them the storm would cease if they threw him overboard. At that moment he put his life back into God's hands. God saved him through a fish, and he did end up bringing God's message to Nineveh, but perhaps the best thing he taught us was the value in keeping your heart soft. Despite how we feel or how deeply we sin, do everything in your power to maintain a soft, responsive heart.