

Not Just Another Big Fish Story; Jonah 4 – “Trying to Run God”

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Let's read the last chapter of Jonah. (Chapter 4)

There is a basic reason that I liked Batman and Robin. Each episode, whether a one parter or a two-parter...always came, eventually, to a logical, practical, “good overcoming evil” conclusion. There is a basic reason why I can't get into shows like Lost, and Heros. They don't resolve. Susan and I were given Lost; Season One on DVD by our boys one Christmas, and that whole vacation we watched one enthralling episode after another. We were engrossed, we thought we were hooked. But I came to realize that I couldn't handle the show ending week after week and not having any resolution, not having any closure, not having any sense that it was going to make sense. I know many people love shows like that, and that's fine; but my life has so little resolution, that I apparently need that in my entertainment...give me a good old Batman, Mayberry, Gunsmoke or a Twins BB game any day!

I mention that because this 4th chapter ends our little book, concludes the story of Jonah...but it doesn't quite resolve; it concludes, but it leaves us hanging a bit. Before we get to the end however, I want to explore how I see Jonah trying to Run God. We've covered in chapter 1 how Jonah tried to Run from God, in chapter 2 how Jonah Ran to God, in chapter 3 how Jonah attempted to Run for God; and today, I'll try to bring an appropriate resolution to this series by considering how Jonah tried to Run God.

There are 4 questions embedded in these 11 verses. 1 is repeated twice. I'd like to look at each of the 3 different questions to get at the answer: How is Jonah trying to Run God? And maybe contemplate how we also might be trying to run God. Here we go. Jonah tries to Run God...

1. BY CHOOSING HOW GOD CAN ANSWER OUR PRAYERS.

“Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord?” (2)

The repentance of the Ninevites from the least to greatest, all across that great city, ought to be the greatest single mark on this notorious Prophet’s ministry; instead; it makes him angry. I’d love to have one hundredth of one percent of that response when I give my next altar call. Don’t get lost trying to figure out the number (its 12) – note that Jonah is mad, at God, for answering his prayer, in a way that he finds distasteful! Back at the point of being puked up by the whale Jonah prays and agrees to go preach to the Ninevites, and here, when God fulfills that prayer...Jonah is beside himself.

Have you ever heard these words thrown in the face of God as a protest, as an insult, as an indictment? *I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry, and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying your people. Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.* Jonah was trying to Run how God responded to the Ninevites.

Jonah was mad at the way the Ninevites responded to his preaching, and he was madder at God for the way he knew God was going to respond to their repentance. He wanted God to destroy these hated enemies, and he had a good reason to; they had destroyed his village, and possibly his family; with all the indignity that entailed. He was a prejudiced Jew who hated all Gentiles, but especially these god-less Assyrian, Ninevite ones. He couldn’t stand the thought that the same God who called and chose and loved, and multiplied his own nationality of people was about to do the same to these despised pagans.

Are we so far removed from Jonah? Have you ever asked God for something, big or small, and then when God begins to answer...we object...because it’s not the way we wanted it, or when we wanted it, or how we wanted it to happen. Don’t pray for patience, or guess what God will do? Give you ample opportunities to practice patience!

Don't pray for healing or health and then object when God expects you to use your restored self to serve Him. Don't pray for God to "Bless You", and then be stingy with the blessings He gives. You're trying to tell God how to answer your prayers; we are pretty accomplished at our own vain attempts to Run God. We dare not ask God to bring revival to our church or our city or our country or our world; if we are going to object to the visitor parking in our spot, or sitting in our pew, or bringing kids who might act out, or who expect us to welcome them...if we're not willing to! Don't ask God to bring healing in your family, if you predetermine that it's your husband who must change...or your wife...or your kids...it might be YOU who needs to change! It might be me! And don't expect God to answer our prayers to bail us out of self-induced circumstances...He might just answer..."you got yourself into this mess...get yourself out!"

Oh; and here is just an interesting little tidbit of historical perspective. God hears the cries of the Ninevite people, over Jonah's prejudiced objections. God spares these people from the destruction they deserve to give them mercy they don't. And some 500 years later these same Assyrians overrun all of Israel and take the whole nation into bondage and captivity. Isn't that an ironic tragedy? If God had just done what Jonah asked, they would not have been able to overthrow God's chosen people. No, no, no, they didn't get it then, and we often don't today; some of these Assyrian believers were the chosen instruments of God, to bring wayward, unfaithful, idol-worshipping Israel, back to Himself! When we pray, expect God to answer...but don't try to tell Him how to answer! Jonah couldn't see 500 years into the future, and we often can't see 5 minutes beyond the present! But God can. Jonah tries to Run God...#2...

2. BY OBEYING WITHOUT A CORESPONDING ATTITUDE.

"Then the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?" (4)

I want to highlight, so we don't miss the coming point, that Jonah did obey God. He cried out to God from his distress, he answers his restated, restart; he preaches the exact message that God sent him to deliver...even in his anger at the Ninevites repentance, he complains to God while praying to God. So even though he's angry with God, he at least does the right thing and takes up his complaint with God. Hum?

I don't think God's question was rhetorical. That's probably why he asked Jonah again in a few verses. God knows Jonah has no right to be angry. He and his beloved nation had received God's favor and forgiveness; so why shouldn't the Ninevites. I'm sure God appreciated Jonah's obedience, but there is something more going on here, isn't there? God is pressing Jonah; God is taking Jonah deeper than mere obedience with this second question. God is trying to help this good "law-keeping", obedient (at least after being caught by a whale) Jew, to see that there is something more important than even obedience.

God wants Jonah to see that preceding obedience there is a decision, and prior to the decision there is a motivation, which is based on a belief, and before even that... there is an attitude. God was trying to help Jonah to come to realize that, obedience is secondary to a willful choice, which is secondary to a proper motive, which is built on a humble self awareness, that is ultimately and initially inspired by a self-less attitude that is born only one place...in God! Jonah's attempt to obey without a God-inspired attitude was nothing more than self-inflated idolatry. Jonah was trying to Run God, by thinking, believing and acting like he was better than those Ninevites.

When we obey God because we got caught doing something wrong, and we think we have to earn our way back to God's favor; we're acting like Jonah. When we obey God out of a sense of duty, but lack any corresponding sense that this is anything more than our religious obligation; then we're playing Jonah's role. When we obey just enough to salve our conscience, or satisfy our parents or spouse; Jonah understands.

When we obey because we know we have to do so to keep God off our back; but we don't accompany that obedience with an equal sense of humble gratitude; then we've identified with Jonah. When we obey, but don't selflessly love...who are we kidding... we've missed the boat and may soon be swallowed by a whale!

The story of Jonah demonstrates that God isn't satisfied with mere compliance. He wants us to understand His character. He wants us to share His viewpoint. He wants us to reflect His attitudes. So God asks Jonah, Job questions: "Who do you think you are to tell me how I must act toward these Ninevites?" "Your obedience might be technically and legally correct...but your anger reveals an attitude that proves your heart is far from the truth." Jonah was trying to run God by obeying with out a corresponding attitude. And lastly, Jonah tries to Run God...#3

3. BY FORGETTING WHAT MATTERS MOST TO GOD.

"Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" (11)

There are a lot of strange twists and turns in this story, from pagan ship hands exchanging their lot-casting dice to belief in Jonah's God; to the whole run in with the whale; to the halting 8 word sermon, to the overwhelming response, repentance, and revival. But the strangest must be this plant. What the heck does the plant mean? Jonah goes outside the city limits, apparently because he can't stand being in the middle of an actual revival. Probably he is hoping that God will change His mind again, and wipe out these evil Assyrians; and he doesn't want to miss that. He builds a little shelter to watch the fireworks; and there he sulks.

Not ever wanting to miss an opportunity to teach Jonah (or us) a valuable lesson, God inspires this plant to grow up over his head. It was apparently the kind of plant that had large leaves that gathered dew in the evening and morning; then as the breeze blew over the leaves; it would act almost like an ancient air-conditioner.

And Jonah LOVED that plant. Did you notice that: *this eased his discomfort, and Jonah was VERY GRATEFUL for the plant.*

Well, the plant doesn't end the story; God also inspires a worm to eat the plant. And you thought the whole whale thing was a stretch. God obviously has control over all the elements of nature; the seas, the whale, the people in Nineveh, and the animals in Nineveh, a plant in the desert, and now a worm! The only one over whom God seems to have no control is...Jonah! Jonah is still trying to Run God.

God then lays the hammer down. "Jonah, you care more about this stupid plant that grew in a day and died the next; than you do about the 120,000 people of Nineveh who will die and spend eternity in hell." "Why can't you remember how desperate you felt while on your journey to Hell, and how I bailed your butt out of the ocean grave?" "How can you love a plant and hate these people?" Jonah forgot what matters most to God...are lost people.

Dare I draw this home? What plants have grown up in our lives that have replaced our passion for lost people? Is it comfortable homes, nice cars, safe neighborhoods, ample retirement accounts, or "me" time? Have we grown so comfortable sitting in our air conditioned sanctuaries that lost people interrupting our "sacred spaces" now offend us? Have we grown so accustomed to having our needs met, that we can no longer make any sacrifice so another's needs might be met? Have our own prejudices dismantled God's desire to extend the good news to some who are still trying to discover their destiny? Have our traditions and rituals and contemporary engagements; have our full plates, and full enough pews convinced us we're doing just fine; while young and old generations continue on their paths...without God? What plants have we allowed to grow into the places that God alone used to occupy?

Do you know the only thing I don't like; and one of the things I most love about the Biblical book of Jonah is that it ends more like "Lost" than Batman. Its conclusion is a bit unresolved.

If this were a story about God's providence in the midst of human disobedience, we could have finished after chapter one. If this book's primary agenda were to teach us how to respond to God after being caught running from God; we'd have stopped after chapter two. There is resolution there. If we wanted this book to be about God's compassion it would have ended after chapter 3. If we wanted this book to be about teaching Jonah, or Israel a lesson; it would have ended after the worm. But God chose to end this book, this story, with this last question; "*Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?*" and it leaves US to answer. Jonah's education and reformation are left a bit unresolved. He is not mentioned again until the NT, but I will remind you...he is the only minor prophet quoted by Jesus. Maybe he got it after all. But how about us?

Are we still trying to run God by expecting Him to answer our prayers the way we think they must be answered? Are we still trying to run God by dutifully obeying without any thought to our attitude, motive, action or behavior? Are we still trying to run God by placing more value on the things that give us comfort and that we have grown to love; while we forget what matters most to God?

We are the only ones who can finish this story...we are the only ones who can bring it to some resolution. It's only three questions...but we have to answer! Let us pray.

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