

Shed three tears for Jonah

the spice box

by Sharon Robertson, Lt. Colonel –

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Sometimes when I think of Jonah I feel like weeping for him—his obduracy, the inflexible pigheadedness that drove him to rebel against the command of God, his begrudging obedience in the end—for all the blessings he lost out on.

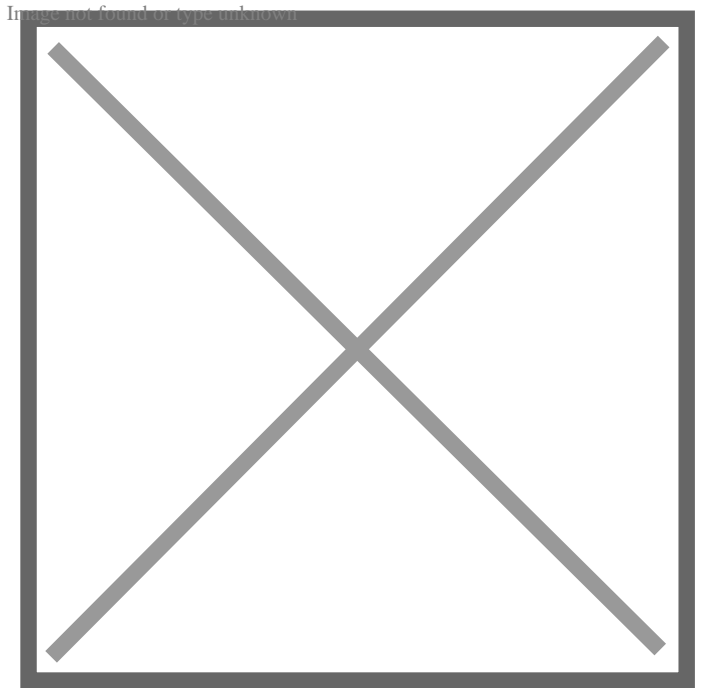
Jonah was a brash and angry man, a patriot who put his duty to his country above his duty to his God. The enemies of his country, Israel, were his bitter enemies, and ought also to have been the enemies of his God—and yet God himself had commanded the unthinkable of him: “Go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2).

Now it wasn’t that Jonah didn’t understand his God. In fact, he knew him too well! If God would proclaim vengeance on Nineveh, and destroy it, Jonah would have had no argument. Jonah feared that the people of Nineveh might actually listen to the message he was to proclaim, and repent—and if that happened...if that happened...

So Jonah went AWOL, a guilt-ridden, unrepentant man who knew well what he was doing, but determined to live with the consequences of his sin. And in spite of the brave efforts of the sailors who made every possible effort to spare his life, this prophet of God chose to pay the penalty of death rather than repent his disobedience. Sad indeed.

Except that it didn’t happen. God had other plans. He prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. For three days and nights Jonah had time to think—and to pray. His utterances from the belly of the great fish form a beautiful prayer of faith in the mercy and redemptive power of God. Jonah knew his God, and that God had chosen to redeem him from the depths of the sea. The prophet agreed to follow God—and experienced the blessing of God’s salvation. But although Jonah determined obedience, his anger lived on. Cast out upon dry land, Jonah received and obeyed the command to take the word of the Lord to Nineveh, but the task went against his every instinct. Jonah found no joy in carrying a message of warning to Nineveh. Destruction, yes; warning, no way!

The bitter rage that burned within demanded vengeance on a merciless enemy. The message he



spoke offered only doom: “Just forty days and Nineveh shall be overturned.” No comforting words regarding repentance and forgiveness were offered. Jonah had no intention of preaching salvation to the sinful multitudes faced with God’s judgment. For three days his vitriolic message thundered through the streets before Jonah, satisfied that his words must surely come true (and, being Jonah, probably praying not only that the wicked city would be destroyed, but that he would be allowed to see the destruction take place), retired to a hillside where he would have a good view.

It didn’t happen. Through miraculous events far greater than Jonah’s miraculous rescue from the sea, the people of Nineveh recognized the source of Jonah’s message, and believed in its truth. In desperation they repented, and called out to Jonah’s God, and worshipped him. And God recognized the depth of their repentance and forgave them.

Jonah was mad—mad at Nineveh, mad at God himself! “I knew it would happen! That’s why I ran away—I knew you were a great God, compassionate and forgiving! Now I want to die!”

Three tears for Jonah! A tear, that he never knew the value of instant, unquestioning obedience to God’s call. Another for grudgingly acceding instead of willingly yielding to God’s will, trusting the consequences to God. And a final tear—that his personal interests blinded him to the joy of seeing hundreds of thousands of souls won to the Lord.

But that’s all. Jonah doesn’t need my pity; he cried enough tears of self-pity on his own. By valuing his own priorities before God’s, he lost out on the incomparable spiritual rewards that should have been his as the result of this great, miraculous ministry, and won only a reprimand from his Lord. Poor Jonah.

May God grant us the wisdom to live in complete and humble obedience to him, the willingness to submit ourselves to his priorities, and the courage to wholeheartedly follow him, no matter where it may lead—and the unspeakable joy of knowing that we have helped win others to him.