

Jonah: What's the point?*Don't pass this off as a story just for kids...*

1:1-3 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish *from the presence of the Lord*. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, *away from the presence of the Lord*.

The 4 chapters of the short book of **Jonah** we are about to study contains a very simple story.

No doubt, many of you could quite easily step up here, take my place, and tell it. We might boil it down like this

- A prophet of God is told to go to Ninevah (an Assyrian city) to cry out a warning of God's pending judgment
- The prophet says "No," and runs the other way
- God stops him with a violent storm and a gulp of a whale
- Repenting, the prophet is thrown up on shore
- A 2nd time, this prophet of God is told to go to Ninevah and cry out a warning of God's pending judgment
- This time, the prophet says "Yes," and goes to Ninevah crying out judgment
- Surprisingly, the entire city of Ninevah repents and God spares the city
- Disgusted, the prophet sits outside the city, complaining to God about His mercy
- And, at the end, God presses Jonah, "What's your problem?"

And...that's the point, isn't it? What is Jonah's problem? We might think about it like this:

**What do I do when my heart
is not aligned with God's heart?**

Has that ever been true for you? A time when it's been very clear that God's heart is for *this*, and your heart is not...or then again, when your heart is very committed to *something* – you really want X -- but you also know there's no way God is for it. **What happens when God and I are polarized?** When He and I are just *not* on the same page?

This happens, of course, much more frequently than we may care to admit. The opening verses of Jonah provide the template

- A CLEAR WORD: God says something to us; a clear word from Him
- I DON'T AGREE: For our own set of reasons, we don't agree nor want to comply
- FELLOWSHIP FORFEITED: Ignoring and/or disobeying, we functionally exit fellowship with God (Jonah: "flees from the presence of the Lord" – twice)
- DO THE OPPOSITE: We choose actions of our own preference

The result? A mis-aligned heart. Which, quite frankly, yields the first lesson of this incredible book:

***A mis-aligned heart leads to foolish
disobedience inviting God's discipline***

For a few minutes, let's go to school on Jonah with these questions.

#1 WHY WAS JONAH'S HEART OUT-OF-ALIGNMENT?

Some background here:

- Jonah was God's spokesman during the reign and in the court of Israel's **King Jeroboam II** (2 Ki 14:23-28) during the years 782-753 BC.
- 800 years before Jesus, **God's chosen people were divided in two** – Israel to the north (10 of the 12 tribes under Jeroboam) and Judah to the south (2 of the tribes). God's Spirit sent prophets to both groups of Abraham's descendants.
- But the “big dog” in the Middle East was **ASSYRIA**

Assyria was the ‘Nazi Germany,’ the ‘ISIS’ of the ancient Middle East.

Her armies simply brutalized whomever they conquered. Listen to

the boast of Assyria's Ashur-nasipal II

I stormed the mountain peaks and I took them. In the midst of those mighty mountains, I slaughtered my enemy. With their blood, I dyed the mountain red like wool. With the rest of my enemies, I darkened the gullies and precipices of the mountains. The head of their warriors I cut off, and I formed those heads into a pillar against their city. Their young men and their maidens I burned with fire. I build a pillar over against the city gates, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins. Some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, still others I bound to the stakes around the pillar.ⁱ



Assyria slaughtered her neighbors, heartlessly deported entire populations from their homelands, and blackmailed them with fear, forcing heavy taxation and tribute. Anyone in the Middle East hearing the very word “Assyria” or its capital city “Ninevah” felt nothing but nausea in the pit of the stomach.

- Finally, a word about **JONAH himself**. He grew up in “Gath-hepher” (in the tribe of Zebulun), a small village just east of Sea of Galilee, not far from Nazareth where Jesus would (800 years later) grow up. But over the years, Jonah would put the word of God into the ears of wicked King Jeroboam II...like other prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah) who were his contemporaries.

It seems that when God put a word in Jonah's mouth, and he delivered it, it would happen. He correctly prophesied to Jeroboam II that Israel would prevail in its struggle with Syria, that Israel would regain its ancient boundaries on the north to the Sea of the Arabah (cf. 2 Kings 14:23-27).

And, it is very likely that when we read the opening verses of his book, Jonah is (cf. C.F. Keil) "a very old man when he is entrusted with his mission to Ninevah."ⁱⁱ Which means Jonah has had decades to nurture



both a fear and a hatred of the Assyrians. If the opening verses mean anything, even if God did, Jonah wanted absolutely nothing to do with Ninevah "thank you very much." Tim Keller puts it this way:ⁱⁱⁱ

Jonah had a problem with the job he was given. But he had a bigger problem with the One who gave it to him. Jonah concluded that because he could not see any good reasons for God's command, there couldn't be any. Jonah doubted the goodness [of God], the wisdom [of God], and the justice of God.

And then Keller adds, "We have all had that experience." Which leads to question...

#2 WHAT MIGHT CAUSE MY HEART TO NOT BE ALIGNED WITH GOD'S?

First is the problem of **NOT LISTENING**: We may not be listening to God

One of the most telling passages in all the Bible is Proverbs chapter 8, where the Holy Spirit pictures God's Wisdom as a town crier at the highly-trafficked gates of a busy city:

Proverbs 8 Does not wisdom call?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

² On the heights beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³ beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:

⁴ "To you, O men, I call,
and my cry is to the children of man.

⁵ O simple ones, learn prudence;
O fools, learn sense.

⁶ Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right,

¹⁰ Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold,

¹¹ for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Gary Hawkins^{iv} (Vancouver BC, Canada): “Is there much spiritual interest, passion in the States...we don’t see it here.” In this world class city, not much interest in listening to God.

A second issue may simply be **NOT AGREEING**: If we’re listening, God is directing us to believe and do something we don’t want to do. Many so-called *modern* people hear the teaching of the Bible, but conclude it is filled with claims that don’t make much sense. “I know what the Bible says, what God wants me to do. I’m just choosing not to agree.” Again, Tim Keller

When this happens, we have to decide—does God know what’s best, or do we? And the default mode of the unaided human heart is always to decide that WE do. We doubt that God is good, or that He is committed to our happiness, and therefore if we can’t see any good reasons for something God says or does, we assume there aren’t any. That’s exactly what Adam and Eve did in the garden.

Adam and Eve, like Jonah many years later, decided that if they couldn’t think of a good reason for a command of God, there couldn’t be one. God could not be trusted to have their best interests in mind. And so they ate.^v

A mis-aligned heart leads to foolish disobedience inviting God’s discipline

Our hearts can get mis-aligned if we are not listening to God, or if we are listening, we choose not to agree with what He is directing.

A third problem is that we may have become **NOT CONFIDENT**: We’ve stopped listening, because we are disappointed or frustrated with God.

Ever been frustrated with God? Sure you have. I have! All kinds of people have struggled with God NOT doing what it seems He should, or ALLOWING what it seems He shouldn’t.

- **Naomi was frustrated with God^{vi}** (Ruth 1:19 – “Don’t call me Naomi or ‘pleasant’. Call me Mara or *bitterness* for the Almighty has made me very bitter!” Her husband died; her two married sons died...her life had collapsed and she blamed *the Almighty*).
- **Gideon was frustrated with God** (Judges 6:13). The Lord approaches him with “The Lord is with you valiant warrior!” (6:12), and Gideon responds, “If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened (i.e. Midian oppressing Israel). And, where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about...now the Lord has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian!”
- **Asaph was frustrated with God** (Psalm 73) – “God, I’ve purified my heart and kept my hands in innocence for nothing! (73:13) All I see is the prosperity of the wicked, who have an easy time of it until they die!” (73:3-4)
- **Martha and Mary were frustrated with God** (John 11:21,32) – “Lord, if you would have just shown up on time, like we asked, our brother would not have died!”

Ever been there? What’s your beef with God? A lost job. A denied promotion? The loss of a loved one? A rebellious child? Others have more than you? A spouse who took off? An unanswered,

often-requested prayer? Some frustration that has lowered your confidence...and so you may have stopped listening or even caring if God speaks, and your heart and God's heart are not on the same page.

Os Hillman stumbled through a 7-year trial, a good portion of that trying to stave off a divorce. Hour after hour he pled with God to move on his behalf, to change his wife's heart. "One day," he writes, "the door slammed shut. It was my darkest day." [Listen carefully to his words]

Feeling betrayed by God, I stormed out the door and walked up the heavily wooded hill behind my house. Reaching the hilltop, I ranted at Him. "God!" I shouted, "Is this how you treat someone who is faithful to you? I've waited and waited. I've worked and prayed. And for what? For this?" My lungs hurt and my throat was raw—but I had one more thing to say to God: "I hate You, God! I hate you!"

I sat down on an old oak tree that had broken at the base and was lying on the ground. For the next three hours, I sobbed uncontrollably, unable to speak, unable to pray. I wondered how God could have abandoned me. I wondered if He even existed. Maybe I had wasted my life believing a myth.

When I got up to leave, I noticed that the fallen oak I had sat on was pointed toward the base of another oak tree—a tree that stood strong and tall with wide spreading branches. At that moment, I heard a quiet voice inside me say, *Today, like this broken oak tree, you are a broken man. But this brokenness was needed in order for you to become like the large, strong oak tree that stands before you.*

I didn't see how that promise could be fulfilled. I wasn't even sure that the promise had come from God; maybe it was my own wishful thinking. Years later, I would look back and know that God Himself had spoken to me out of the darkness and silence of my black hole.^{vii}

Jonah's heart was out-of-alignment with God's. He hated what God had called him to do. Our hearts can also be out-of-alignment. We're not listening. We don't agree with what we hear. We may not be confident God has our best in mind, or doing anything about it. Here's the real danger:

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So here's question

#3 HOW CAN I RE-ALIGN MY HEART WITH THE LORD'S?

It seems to me that there are two ways re-alignment can happen. First,

a) TOUGH WAY: If we persist in not listening and aligning,
re-alignment may happen through God's discipline

We might call this "alignment the tough way." It's the way Jonah chose. As we will explore next week, somehow, somehow, Jonah got it in his head that he could "flee from the presence of the Lord." If he wasn't *in King Jeroboam's court chapel*...or if he wasn't *at the central place of worship*

(perhaps Shechem)...or *wherever Jonah used to meet* with the Lord, Jonah mistakenly thought he could leave God in the rear view mirror. “A mis-aligned heart leads to foolish disobedience.”

Psalm 139: 7 Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,”

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

There’s the TOUGH WAY to see your heart aligned with God’s. Then, there is

b) THE BETTER WAY – **realignment through humbling
yourself** before a God who often gives you time to repent

Elisabeth Eliot, the young missionary wife who saw her husband Jim murdered by the Auca Indians^{viii} as he attempted to bring them the gospel, was reflecting on Isaiah 64:7-9.

7 There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

8 But now, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;^{ix}
we are all the work of your hand.

9 Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

Elisabeth simply noted observed this: *The word **humble** comes from the root word **humas**, “earth, clay” she wrote. “I am clay.”*

Humbling myself, humbling yourself, is genuinely recognizing who we truly are. We are nothing but clay. Clay that the Potter wants to shape and use for great and eternal things...like calling people back to God and giving them a chance at life. If our heart is aligned with His. If we are not just listening, but listening to His voice and very personally obeying in the power of the Holy Spirit wherever He asks us to go, and whatever He calls us to do.

Is your heart aligned with God's heart these days? Or by any chance are you attempting to "flee from the presence of the Lord"?

Andrew Murray, *Humility*, p.99

"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will exalt you. It cannot be repeated too often. The highest glory of the creature is in being a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. I can do this only as I am willing to be nothing in myself, and that God may be everything. He that humbles himself will be exalted. Of this truth Jesus himself is the proof."

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ⁱ T. Laetsch, *Minor Prophets*, 221.

ⁱⁱ C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes – Volume X Minor Prophets*, "Jonah," (Eerdmans, 1977), 379. Note: "...if [this entrustment] did not take place until after the invasion of Israel of Israel by [Syria's] Pul."

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy* (New York: Viking, 2018), 15.

^{iv} Gary and Arlene Hawkins, a delightful couple from Vancouver BC we met on our trip to Alaska, June 23-30, 2019.

^v Keller, 16-17.

^{vi} As you will read in the Fall 2019 Devotional "A Cord of Three Strands."

^{vii} Os Hillman, *The Upside of Adversity: Rising from the Pit to Greatness* (Regal, 2006), 48.

^{viii} Philip James Elliot was an evangelical Christian who was one of five missionaries killed while participating in Operation Auca, an attempt to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador. Born: October 8, 1927, Portland, OR Died: January 8, 1956, Curaray River, Ecuador Spouse: Elisabeth Elliot (m. 1953–1956) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Elliot

^{ix} Cf. Jeremiah 18:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear^{al} my words." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'

¹² "But they say, 'That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"