

Hanging out With Heros

JONAH

Doing God's will
the hard way



Lorraine
Peterson

HANGING OUT WITH HEROES

JONAH

Doing God's Will The Hard Way

Lorraine Peterson

JONAH: DOING GOD'S WILL THE HARD WAY

Contents:

God Always Means What He Says

Whaling and Wailing

Choose the Easy Way and Enjoy the Trip

Spread the Blessings Around

The God of the Second Chance

The Supply is Unlimited – Just Help Yourself

Seeing Eye to Eye with God

Scripture References:

New International Version of the Bible

Cover Design: Michael Minnema

Images: With permission from Sweet Publishing and FreeBibleimages.org

JONAH: DOING GOD’S WILL THE HARD WAY

Introduction

Trying to Run Away from God

Maybe you think you're young only once, so you should live it up a little. After all, there'll be plenty of time to do God's will later. You may reason that if you go your own way for a while, you'll get the rebellion out of your system and you'll be steadier to serve God. All of this is a lie – straight from the devil. If you're tempted to believe it, you need to take a look at a man who tried this philosophy: Jonah, the son of Amittai.

The Bible makes it clear that Jonah was a real person, thus undermining the argument that the book of Jonah is only fiction with a nice moral lesson. First, he was recognized as a real prophet. 2 Kings 14: 25 says he predicted

the former boundaries of Israel would be restored. (Jonah was not a common name in Old Testament times, so no one can reasonably argue that Jonah the son of Amittai mentioned in 2 Kings was another person.)

Second, Jonah was from a real place. He came from Gath Hepher, which is the modern village of el Meshed, about five miles from Nazareth.

Third, Jesus twice told His listeners to consider the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12: 39-14; 16: 4), and predicted, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12: 40). Those who question the accuracy of the account of Jonah reject not only the integrity of the Old Testament, but the integrity of Jesus Christ as well!

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn the people their city would be destroyed if they did not stop their wickedness. Jonah knew, however, that God would not destroy Nineveh if the people repented. But Jonah hated Nineveh and wanted the city destroyed – for good reason. Assyria, with its capital at Nineveh, was the superpower of the world, constantly conquering more territory; and “at this time the Assyrians were making forays down into the northern kingdom of Israel.” (1) They would make surprise attacks on cities. After taking the women captive, they would kill all the men and children. So, it’s possible the Assyrians had murdered people Jonah knew personally. Modern historians rank the Assyrians among the cruelest oppressors of all times. Jonah felt justified in refusing to go to Nineveh.

(1) J. Vernon McGee, *Jonah & Micah*. Pasadena: Through the Bible Books, 1982, p. 30.

Jonah hurried to Joppa, the nearest seaport, and boarded a ship headed for Tarshish, a city on the southern coast of Spain – as far away from Nineveh as he could travel. He couldn’t, however, escape from God.

A huge storm came up and terrorized the men on the ship, so each began praying to his god. Jonah, however, was sleeping. The captain woke him and asked him to pray to his God as well. Then they cast lots (something like our throwing dice) to see who had caused the great disaster, and the lot fell on Jonah. As they quizzed him, Jonah admitted he was running away from the

God who made heaven and earth. So the men asked Jonah what to do. He suggested they throw him overboard.

How Can a Man Live Inside a Fish?

The Bible says, “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (Jonah 1: 17; 2: 10). Many skeptics, of course, assert this never happened, that miracles are impossible, but if you know God and have seen Him change lives, you'll have no problem believing this “whale of a tale.”

There are several ways of approaching the “Jonah in the whale” mystery. It is possible that God created a special fish (the Bible says fish, not whale) with custom features to keep Jonah safe for three days and three nights. And some recognized Bible scholars think Jonah died inside the whale and was then raised from the dead to provide a picture of the resurrection of Jesus. Or it may be that Jonah simply survived in the belly of a whale.

There is strong evidence that Jonah could remain intact inside a whale. One writer reports that “entire sharks and seals have been found in the bellies of both sperm and killer whales.” (2) In 1941, Eugene Maximillian Karl Geiling, a Chicago pharmacology professor, crawled through the gullet of a dead whale to prove it could be done. He noted, “It was a pretty slimy trip, but there was plenty of room.” (3) These accounts don't prove a man could live within a whale for three days, but they do show he could fit.

(2) Christopher Hallowell, “Research Report,” *The Dial*, Dec. 1982, p. 15.

(3) Hy Gardner, “Glad You Asked About That,” *The Star News*, Washington, D. C., January 10, 1974.

There are quite a few old yarns about whalers swallowed by their prey, and even a few about men living through the ordeal. According to writer David Gunston, however, “In a long and close study of the subject I have discovered

only one instance completely corroborated by reliable authorities, and its details are so remarkable that it is worth recounting.” The victim was David Bartly.

In February, 1891, Bartly was aboard the *Star of the East*, an English whaling ship searching near the Falkland Islands for oil-rich sperm whales about 60-70 feet long. Upon spotting a whale, the crew gave chase in two small boats. One harpooner speared the whale in the side, and during the ensuing struggle, the other boat overturned. One man drowned, and a later check revealed that Bartly was missing.

After killing the whale, crewmen secured it to the side of their ship and began to cut the huge creature apart. The next morning as they prepared to cut open the stomach, it moved! Mystified, they opened it and found fellow crewmember, David Bartly, “doubled up, drenched, but still alive though deeply unconscious.” His face and hands had been bleached white by the whale’s gastric juices. The men soaked him with seawater and put him to bed in the captain’s cabin. At first delirious, within three weeks Bartly recovered. When recounting the experience, Bartly said breathing was no problem, but he found his “prison” terribly hot. (The body temperature of a whale is 104 degrees F.) Bartly continued his life as a sailor and apparently avoided publicity. (4)

(4) David Gunston, “The Man Who Lived Inside a Whale and His Name Was Not Jonah,” *Compass*, Spring, 1972, pp. 10, 11.

David Bartly’s experience has been authenticated by fellow crewmembers and investigated by others. Both the captain and another officer of the *Star of the East* issued separate and detailed accounts of the incident. Later, the story was investigated by M. de Parville, a respected scholar who was scientific editor of the *Paris Journal des Debats*, and Sir Francis Fox, an esteemed British civil engineer; both scrutinized the details of the incident and concluded the story was accurate.

David Bartly’s ordeal doesn’t prove a man could live three days and three nights inside a whale without miraculous intervention. After all, Bartly was not inside the whale as long as Jonah was, and Bartly’s whale was dead part of that time. Nonetheless, the incident should squelch people who categorized

the account of Jonah and the whale with *Gulliver's Travels* and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Having learned his lesson, Jonah went straight to Nineveh and found himself facing a huge task. Although the actual walled city (unearthed by modern archaeologists) was only about 2.5 miles long and 1.3 miles wide, it was surrounded by several large cities equivalent to today's suburbs. Experts estimate the area's population at several million. Jonah, therefore, had a large area to cover and a large audience to reach. (5) With God's help the message reached the people and they repented from their sins. Jonah should have been delighted with his success, but he wasn't.

(5) J. Vernon McGee, *Jonah & Micah*. Pasadena: Through the Bible Books, 1982, pp. 56-59.

After preaching to this metropolis, Jonah erected a small shelter and camped in it, waiting to see Nineveh destroyed. God even provided a vine to give shade from the hot sun, and to get Jonah's attention. But a worm chewed the stem and killed the vine. This made Jonah angry. He didn't hear God saying, "How can you be mad because a plant died, yet not care at all about the people of Nineveh – including 120,000 children?" God wanted Jonah to see things from His perspective.

The Bible doesn't say if Jonah learned his lesson. In a sense, that doesn't matter, because the most important question is: Have *you* learned *your* lesson? Have you learned to do exactly what God says? To see things from His point of view? You probably have a ways to go in that department. And if you do, you can learn from Jonah.

God Always Means What He Says

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that part. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord" (Jonah 1: 1-3).

“I'm praying about whether or not to steal the money.”

“I'm seeking God's will about marrying a non-Christian.”

“God wouldn't let me fall in love with Henry if it weren't His will for me to date him.”

“I got the last ticket available for the heavy metal concert so I know it's God's will that I attend.”

“My friend lent me the money to run away from home so I'm certain I'm doing the right thing.”

Wait a minute! Something is radically wrong with these statements. What is it?

Jonah may have used the same kind of reasoning to duck out of God's command to go to Nineveh and warn the people. Jonah had good reasons for not wanting to go there. The Assyrians were the cruelest people in the Middle East, and Nineveh was their capital. They skinned people alive. They buried men up to their necks in the hot desert sand, put holes in their tongues, and let them bake to death. They used men's heads as decorations for their garden parties. They had made raids into Israel, so they may have killed friends or relatives of Jonah. He had some very good excuses.

But quality of excuses wasn't the point. God had told Jonah to go. Period. Jonah wasn't supposed to say, “How unpatriotic to help Israel's enemies. Besides, no other prophet has ever been asked to do such a thing. And God should punish the Ninevites for being so cruel. It must not be God's will that I go. Oh, wow! I just heard there are no tickets for Nineveh until next month, but the last ticket for Tarshish is available. Now I know I'm not supposed to go to Nineveh.” Does this kind of reasoning sound silly? Of course. When God told Jonah to head for Nineveh, that was God's will.

Sometimes your reasoning is just as ridiculous. You must, therefore, learn to take God's Word at face value. God says, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody” (Romans 12: 17), live with high standards. So, if a voice tells you to do a little cheating or shoplifting, assume you're hearing the devil. When God says, “Do not be

yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6: 14), consider the issue settled. It is not God's will that you marry a non-Christian. A desire is not necessarily a sign of God's will, for “each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed” (James 1: 14). Neither is an ideal circumstance a sign of God's will.

You understand the importance of obeying instructions. If your mom asked you to buy two loaves of bread at the store, you don't spend two hours trying to decide what your mother's will is. You buy two loaves of bread. If the store is out of bread, you don't conclude that your mother actually wants chocolate cake. Or if you're hungry for Nachos, you don't spend the money on a bag of Chips.

Just as your mother clearly states her instructions, God clearly states His will in His Word; no amount of rationalizing about circumstances or desires will alter what God says in His Word. God means what He says – every time.

Once you get used to obeying God precisely, you'll develop an instinctive “feel” for God's will. It's a natural result of listening. If you've carefully listened to your mother, you can buy a gift that probably will please her – even if she has never said she'd like that item. A similar thing happens when you've carefully listened to God. By regularly studying God's Word and asking the Holy Spirit to show you verses you need and to show you how to apply them to your life, you'll soon know God very well. So well, in fact, that sometimes you'll sense in your spirit what He wants, without even looking for a verse, because you'll be hearing His voice. Nothing is as important in finding God's will as the words He himself has spoken.

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered” (Matthew 21: 28-31).

1. What is more important, piously talking about doing God's will or obeying His Word?
2. According to Jesus, what does doing God's will actually mean?
3. Do you glibly talk about doing God's will without ever thinking about His Word?
4. When you must make a decision, do you *first* go to the Word of God or do you just do a lot of talking?

Whaling and Wailing

“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord ... Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1: 3, 15, 17).

If Jonah had relied on circumstances and opinion polls to show him God's will, all of them would have indicated he should not go to Nineveh. 1. It was a long, hard trip. 2. The Assyrians of Nineveh were enemies of Israel. 3. The Assyrians were so cruel that everyone else in the world thought the destruction of Nineveh was a good idea. 4. None of Jonah's friends would have encouraged him to go. But God doesn't pay attention to such statistics.

If you wander through the maze of circumstances, looking for God's will without heeding the Bible and the voice of the Holy Spirit, you'll become a practicing atheist. Your attitude will be: If it looks easy, if everything works out, and if it's what I want, I'll go for it. God's Word says, however, you must “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5: 7).

Biblical examples of people receiving guidance show that often the circumstances fell in line after the person began following God's directions. The circumstances before Moses crossed the Red Sea, before Joshua conquered Jericho, and before David killed Goliath were terrible. But these men knew God well enough to discover His will from His Word and the voice of His Holy Spirit within.

If you're like most people, you probably tend to live as a pagan but piously stick God's name into conversations about guidance: “The sun is shining today so it must be God's will for us to go on a picnic”; “Tom invited me to the game so it must be God's will that I skip the algebra assignment”; “I lost the money I was going to give in the offering so God must not want me to give anything to the church this week.” Such thinking is devoid of faith and renders to every breeze of fate rather than trusting God for guidance. Circumstances play only a small role in discovering God's will.

Some issues of God's will are cut and dried, because God has provided specific scripture on the topic. For example, you don't have to sit around wondering if you should love your enemies; the Scriptures say you must, so you obey – regardless of the circumstances. Other issues, though, are not as clear, so you need guidance from the Scriptures and from the Holy Spirit. These issues include decisions such as what subjects to take, whether or not to buy a motorcycle, which college to attend, what career to pursue, and where to live. And there are some issues that God may leave completely to your discretion, such as what color shirt to buy, what to eat for lunch, or which football team you cheer for. In every decision, however, you must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Norman Grubb, a famous missionary leader, gives some useful guidelines for decision-making. First, you should not expect an audible voice because God almost always speaks to a person by making an impression on his heart. He says, “... guidance is the direct communication of the Spirit with your spirit.” The Holy Spirit will apply a certain Bible verse to your situation or give you inner assurance that a certain course of action is correct. To receive such revelation from the Holy Spirit you must be willing to obey (no matter what); then you must use your mind in the right way – not to make the final decision, but to gather information. Grubb claims the mind's “function is to investigate, tabulate, theorize, memorize, but not to direct.” You are responsible to examine your situation, gather facts, and study relevant Scripture.

Next, you should deliberately stop thinking about the situation and trust God, believing that you, as God's servant, have a right to know what He wants you to do. With such an attitude you'll be free from worry and a sense of urgency.

With such peace in yourself, you'll be able to hear the Holy Spirit. He will show you if a circumstance makes certain actions necessary or if a particular Scripture clarifies God's will in your situation. However, it is always the Holy Spirit, not our outward circumstances, that determines God's will for us. 6)

(6) Norman Grubb, *Touching the Invisible*. Fort Washington, PA: CLC, 1960, pp. 22-25.

Jonah knew God's will, but he didn't want to obey God. He rushed into action based solely on his view of the circumstances. He did not listen to God's clear guidance, so Jonah's stubbornness and resulting ignorance led to his experience of whaling and wailing! Willingness to obey, waiting for the voice of the Holy Spirit, and expecting God to show you His way will save you from a "Jonah and the whale" experience.

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him" (Psalm 32: 8-10).

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23: 1-3).

1. What promises do you have that God will guide you? Do you believe them and claim them or do you run around saying, "I just don't know which way to turn"?
2. What kind of attitude keeps God's instructions to you from sinking in?
3. In what kinds of paths does God lead you? In light of this fact, what can keep you from finding the right road?
4. What is the promise for those who trust God? Are you trusting God to show you His will?

Choose the Easy Way and Enjoy the Trip

“Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. Then the sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea,’ he replied, ‘and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.’ But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1: 4, 7, 12, 17).

What’s the most frightening experience you can think of? Nuclear war? Cancer? Losing your parents? Realizing you're married to the wrong person? It may surprise you to find out that there is a right answer to that question. The most frightening experience a person can have is being out of the will of God.

All sorts of disasters can come from being out of God's will. Take Jonah, for example. Because he didn’t want to preach in Nineveh, he tried to run away from God, and the ship he was on encountered a dreadful storm. When the captain finally woke him, he saw the terror-stricken faces of the other men on board. How ashamed he must have felt when he realized that he was causing innocent people to suffer! But he felt even worse when he had to admit his guilt and be thrown overboard. Imagine sliding down the esophagus of a huge fish. He could do without such high adventure! Jonah found that being out of God's will was worse than any nightmare.

Don’t think that you're different, that you can run away from God without suffering the consequences. God made it very clear to the Israelites that His people reap exactly what they sow: “All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 28: 2), and the list of blessings is a long one. On the other hand: “However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28: 15), and the list of curses is longer than the list of blessings.

The consequences of obedience or disobedience are part of a spiritual

principle Jesus illustrated this way: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7: 24). Even amidst violent storms the house stood firm. But Jesus continued, “But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matthew 7: 26). This house on the sand, of course, was ruined by the rains and the floods. Why? Because when you are out of God's will, when you are not obeying all His commands and practicing all His teachings, you lay yourself open to all kinds of trouble.

Following God does not assure you a problem-free life; Jesus said both houses would go through storms. After all, the greatness of the storm on the outside does not cause disaster; but if the storm gets inside of you, then you’ve got trouble. This is why the same troubles can be a blessing for one person and a curse for another. For example, if a man with a gun holds up two people in a subway, one may pray in faith and trust so his fear disappears, and thus have a blessed experience to remind him of God's faithfulness. The other person, however, with no power except his own, may become so traumatized that he will be afraid to go out alone for the rest of his life.

If Jonah had obeyed God in the first place, his trip to Nineveh would have been much less eventful – and much less painful! He could have chosen the easy way and enjoyed the trip. You can avoid making the same mistake.

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; the face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the lord delivers him from them all ...” (Psalm 34: 15-17, 19).

“Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” (1 Peter 3:13).

“But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love” (Psalm 33: 18).

1. What promises of protection do those who follow God's will have?
2. What have those who do evil brought upon themselves?
3. Rather than offering the person who follows God a problem-free life, what does God promise him?
4. Is being in God's will more important to you than anything else? What are some reasons for making God's will the most important thing in your life?

Spread the Blessings Around

“Then the sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. This terrified them and they asked, ‘What have you done?’ (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, ‘What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?’ ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea,’ he replied, ‘and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.’” (Jonah 1: 7, 10-12).

You’ve heard it. Maybe you’ve even said it: “It’s my life and I can do what I want.” It sounds logical. But is it true?

The Bible says, “For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone” (Romans 14: 7). Whatever you say or do affects many other people. Your choice to do God's will or to act on your feelings will help or hurt those around you much more than you realize.

Jonah’s disobedience harmed many people. The storm God used to bring runaway Jonah to his senses affected everyone on the ship – everyone faced the fear of drowning and the fear of having to throw Jonah overboard.

Jonah’s “detour” affected the people of Nineveh; because they had to wait longer to hear that repentance was possible and no doubt some died during the delay. And, of course, Jonah’s slow obedience affected those who followed his example as a prophet of God. They may have decided, “If a prophet can run away from God, it’s okay for me to disobey once in a while too.”

You're no different than Jonah; your example is important to many people. (I still remember my feelings when a lady told me her nine-year-old daughter idolized me. I was completely taken by surprise. I had been unaware of how important my example was to that little girl.) You will never know how many people are being affected by your life. The way you live is noticed by your family, your friends, your teachers, your fellow-workers, your neighbors, and even casual acquaintances. But don't get burdened with the awesomeness of the responsibility or get a guilt complex for not doing better. You don't need to paste on an artificial smile and take acting lessons so everyone will think you're a model Christian.

God does the perfecting work in you. The Bible assures us that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5: 17). You must believe and act on this fact. God's new creations aren't inferior products. He stands by to give you the strength, the righteousness, the joy – everything you need to be what He wants you to be. Any self-consciousness comes from the devil who whispers, "Oh, dear, everyone's watching you. You'll probably fail and blow your testimony."

God wants you to see life as a wonderful challenge rather than as a threat. What a privilege to be a positive example of God's new creations, demonstrating that Jesus lives inside you. Knowing this, you can relax and let the Jesus inside you shine out for all to see. You can say with the Apostle Paul, "Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2: 20), and Christ only wants to do God's will. And that's just what He will do if you don't stand in His way with unbelief or stubbornness. By living in God's will you'll enjoy great blessings – with plenty left over to spread around to others!

"Brothers loved by God, we know that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so, you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say

anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1: 4-9).

1. How do you know that Paul, who wrote the above letter to the Thessalonians, was letting Jesus inside him shine out to others?
2. How do you know that the Thessalonians, even though they were new Christians, were letting Jesus inside them spread to their neighbors?
3. What kind of things automatically happen when Jesus is allowed to live His life through a Christian?
4. Have you believed the devil’s line that you must live the Christian life in your own strength and that it’s a terrible burden? Decide not to believe this lie.

The God of the Second Chance

“From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.” And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (Jonah 2: 1, 2, 8-10).

As you're reading about God's will, your heart may be aching – you know you're out of God's will. Perhaps you're depending on drugs or alcohol to help you forget your problems; or you're involved in a dating relationship that has gotten out of control; or you’ve gotten into a habit of cheating, or shoplifting, or stealing little things from your employer. Perhaps you’ve become chained by laziness, procrastination, and lack of self-discipline, and are unable to do what you should. Perhaps you feel hopelessly out of God's will as the devil whispers, “It’s no use, give up.” If this is your predicament, the story of Jonah will be good news. It will give you hope.

No matter how bad you feel, Jonah felt even worse as he entered the mouth of the great fish. After all, he was a prophet and he should have known better than to run away from God. What a terrible testimony he had been to the men on the ship! As the fish gulped him down, Jonah didn't realize the storm had stopped, so he probably was feeling responsible for the certain deaths of the innocent men on the ship. He saw no possibility of making amends. But in this tough situation he repented and promised to go to Nineveh. He said, "What I have vowed (promised) I will make good." And God performed a complete miracle to give Jonah a second chance.

You, too, can know the God of the second chance. No matter what you've done, you can repent and get back into God's will. The only catch is that you have to go to Nineveh – stop taking drugs, or break off the relationship, or pay back the money you stole. That is real repentance.

When you repent you turn around. You have to retrace your steps. So where did you get off track in the first place? What were you unwilling to do? God won't make any deals. He expects obedience on the very issue that kept you from His will in the first place. Jonah had to go to Nineveh. You must go to your Nineveh. There is no other way to get right with God.

Don't wait as long as Jonah did to return to God. Don't ignore that uneasy feeling of guilt. Don't decide you'll keep sinning just a little longer. Don't buy a ticket to Tarshish. Don't get your conscience so hardened you can sleep soundly even if you're disobeying God. Don't become so insensitive that only a big shock will bring you around – three days in a whale's stomach is not a pleasant experience. Ask anyone who has persisted in disobeying God and he will tell you: It would have been a lot easier to obey God's will in the first place. If you are out of God's will, take the second chance that God offers. And take it now.

"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (Isaiah 55: 6, 7).

“Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!” (Ezekiel 18: 30-32).

1. What does God promise to those who repent, change their ways, and get back into the will of God?
2. What are the dangers of continuing in sin?
3. Ask God to search your heart. If you are out of His will, get right with God and get back on track.
4. Thank God that He will give you all the strength and grace you need to walk in the right way.

The Supply Is Unlimited – Just Help Yourself

“Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go all through it. Jonah started into the city, going a day’s journey, and he proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.’ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3: 3-5, 10).

Do you ever think God asks the unreasonable? Do you wonder how a missionary can live with a jungle tribe in unsanitary conditions, endure ridicule for language mistakes, and eat monkey meat and toasted beetle grubs, yet survive without TV, pizza, and ski trips – just so the jungle dwellers can hear about Jesus? Do you ask how it could ever be God's will to give up a cherished dream to play in the big leagues or to sing professionally, in order to serve the Lord? Do you fear that God's will is something too hard for you to do?

Jonah certainly could have used that argument. Going to Nineveh must have seemed impossible. First of all, it was over five hundred miles away – straight across the desert, but much farther by common trade routes. The trip would be long and lonely. Second, the city proper was fortified with tall, thick walls and well-guarded gates, so Jonah couldn't be sure of entering even after traveling all that way. Third, as you've already read, the people of Nineveh were famous for cruelty. Certainly, some foreigner prophesying the destruction of their city would be a prime candidate for torture and death. Fourth, if he did get to preach, why would these idol worshipers pay attention to anything the God of Israel had to say? Jonah probably thought God was asking too much of him.

Interestingly, once Jonah decided to obey, he was able to travel to Nineveh. He got inside the city and preached, and the people listened and repented! Nothing similar had happened when Jonah preached in Israel. This was a miracle.

If you think God's will is too difficult and you like Jonah have disobeyed, take heart. The power to carry out God's wishes is available if you decide to obey.

True obedience, however, comes from a heart of faith and love – not merely from a sense of obligation. You can obey either from fear or from faith! If you obey God because “God is a big meanie, but I'd better do what He says anyway,” you aren't in a position to receive the grace and power God has to give. You are believing a lie. On the other hand, if you obey in faith, knowing that what God asks of you is best for you and that He will give you the strength you need to carry out His instructions, doing God's will; will not be a struggle, but a joy. The task that appeared hard will become a challenge and adventure with God; you will expect miracles and a new depth of relationship with Him.

If you act in faith, you can break up with your non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend, and God will fill your emotional needs in His way. If you act in faith, you can take a stand for Jesus in Social Problems class, and God will give you supernatural courage and the right words to say. If you act in faith, you can obey your alcoholic father, and God will work in his heart – and

yours – to heal your shattered relationship.

When you go out on a limb to obey God, you'll be in very good company. By faith, Abraham left Ur, Moses crossed the Red sea, Joshua conquered Jericho, and David faced Goliath. Take the risk to join them – God has not changed.

Pray this way: “Lord, I'm willing to obey, but I have to depend on you for every ounce of wisdom and strength.” Receive it from Him, and help yourself to God's never-ending supply of courage, grace, peace, wisdom, and strength.

“This is love for God; to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God has overcome the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5: 3, 4).

“With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word” (Psalm 119: 13-16).

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119: 18).

“Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; renew my life according to your word” (Psalm 119: 35, 37).

1. What makes people think God's commandments are too strict and too difficult to obey?
2. Why should you rejoice in whatever God commands you to do?
3. Pray with the Psalmist that God will show you how wonderful obeying all of God's commands can be.
4. Are you afraid that God's will is too difficult for you? Talk this over with God.

Seeing Eye to Eye with God

“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm that chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’ But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left ...’” (Jonah 4: 5-11).

It’s probably happened to you – a painful quarrel with someone you love because you didn’t understand his or her priorities. On Saturday your father arrives to pick you up at the mall exactly at 11:30 a.m. as he had promised, but you are fifteen minutes late. As you climb into the car, you apologize as best you can for being late, then explain, “At five to eleven I discovered a sale on sweaters. They had my size – and even the colors I wanted! What a fantastic bargain!” Then you remember, “Oh, and Dad, I bought a bag of peanuts for you.”

Instead of flashing his usual broad grin at your generosity, your father merely mutters something.

Then you exclaim, “Dad, we’re only a block from Jennifer’s house! Can we stop there? She promised me the biology notes from the two days I missed last week, and Monday’s test will be a biggie. Please. It’ll only be a minute.”

Now your father explodes, “Can’t you ever think of anyone except yourself?” Stunned, you wonder what you did wrong.

You had forgotten your father has a crucial business deal pending, and that he needed to reach the post office by noon, before it closed, to mail several important business letters. Now, because of your lateness and heavy traffic, he won't get those letters mailed. Your father’s priorities are very different

from yours. As you can see, it's important to understand what others consider important.

How can you discover what's important to another person? Start by listening very carefully to everything he says. Spend so much time with him that you can automatically sense what his priorities are. As you learn to love him more and more, you'll be willing to sacrifice your priorities for his.

You learn what is important to God by the same method. Much of doing God's will depends on getting to know Him so well that you automatically know how He thinks and then you'll grow to love Him so much that for His sake you'll willingly sacrifice anything you want because God's priorities will be yours.

Jonah didn't share God's priorities. Why? Pay close attention so you don't allow yourself to commit the same errors. First, Jonah was caught up in running his own life, going where he wanted to go. Only a whack on the head, a personal tragedy, or a terrible storm and a tour of a whale's digestive tract could make him consider going where God wanted him to go.

Second, Jonah was prejudiced. He didn't like pagans. He thought the Ninevites were mean, cruel, and terrible (and some, of course, were). He didn't view them as equals, people created by God. He wouldn't let God give him love for the people of Nineveh. When Jonah did preach to them, he was disappointed that God didn't destroy their city. He didn't recognize God's purpose in the lives of others.

Third, Jonah had mixed-up priorities. He placed great importance on little things such as the plant that provided him shade. Therefore, when a worm destroyed the plant, he was angry. God explained to him that the people of Nineveh were much more important to Him than some plant. God was trying to give Jonah His eternal point of view. Sadly, the Bible doesn't say Jonah changed his attitude.

You're probably thinking Jonah was being very selfish and hardhearted, like a spoiled brat. But if you double-check the list, more than likely you'll find you're not very different than Jonah. Ask yourself these questions:

Am I too busy running my own life to find out what God wants me to

do?

Do I hide a list of “I won'ts” some place deep in my heart?

Are there little comforts and joys in my life that I place above the will of God?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you must take action. You must rid yourself of the things that keep you from seeing eye to eye with God, things that keep you from sharing His priorities. Learn to let God's will become your will.

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4: 34).

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6: 38).

“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed; but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1: 20, 21).

1. Honestly fill in the blank” “For me to live is _____.”
2. What should you start doing so you can begin to think as God thinks, and so His will is your top priority?
3. Tell God that you want to get to know Him better. Then study His Word and learn what His will is; surrender your “I won'ts” to God; decide you want to become the person who can say, “For me to live is Christ.”