

Jonah goes to Nineveh...

**and learns about God's
compassion**

[credits]

Jonah the prophet knew that when God speaks, He doesn't shout, he whispers. So you can ignore what God is saying and carry on doing what you want. But that isn't a very good idea.

One day God said, "Jonah, I've got a very important job for you." Jonah liked the idea of that. People called him a minor prophet but when God gave him an important job it made him feel like a VIP, a Very Important Prophet. "There is a great city full of thousands of people," said God, "so large it takes three days to walk from one side to the other. The people are living the wrong way. They keep breaking all my golden rules and if this doesn't stop, there will be consequences! I want you to go and tell them to change their way of living and thinking."

Jonah wondered where this great city might be. He didn't think it was Jerusalem.

Perhaps he would have to go to Egypt and meet Pharaoh.

He'd heard that there was a new city being built in the West called Rome but he didn't think that was very big yet and it wouldn't be built in a day.

"Jonah," whispered God, "I want you to go to Nineveh. End of message."

"Nineveh! Oh no." thought Jonah. "Yeuk! Spit! Peuk! Bleagh! I hate them! If something really bad is going to happen to the people of Nineveh because they keep breaking God's rules, that's fine by me! They deserve it after what they did to our people."

But Jonah knew that if he didn't do what God told him to, God wouldn't nag him but he would end up the worse off for it. So he decided to go as far away from Nineveh as possible.

Instead of going East to Nineveh, he went West towards the coast and came down to the seaside town of Joppa.

There were ships in port ready to sail to different countries such as Egypt, Greece, Rome and even as far as Cornwall to get some tin. Jonah chose a ship owned by two Phoenician brothers called Hiram and Phyras which was going to Tarshish in Spain. "Forget about Nineveh," he said to himself, "and just sit back and enjoy a sunny pleasure cruise to the Costa del Tarshish."

All was fine for the first few days but one morning the wind got up and the sea got choppy. Jonah felt a bit sea sick but hoped it would pass. But the wind got stronger and turned into a gale. The sailors did everything they could but even those who had sailed those waters for many years were really frightened that the ship would sink and they would all be drowned.

When they had tried everything else, they called for a Multi Faith Prayer Meeting, hoping that somebody's god was listening and would do something about the storm. So the Egyptians prayed to Ra and the Philistines prayed to Dagon and the Greeks prayed to Poseidon and the Phoenicians prayed to Baal. Everyone was praying for all they were worth... except Jonah, who lay back on his deckchair looking seasick.

"Come on," shouted the sailors, "pray to your god as well! Maybe your god will save us."

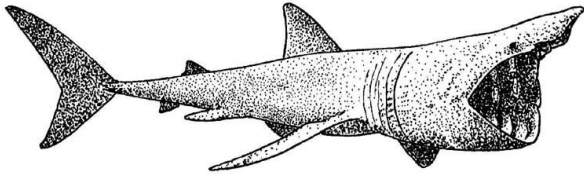
In fact, God had heard the prayers of all the sailors, whatever they called him, and had compassion on them all, even though he was really disappointed with Jonah.

"It's no use," replied Jonah, "it's all my fault. This has happened because I was supposed to go to Nineveh and I'm running away from what God wants me to do. The only thing you can do is pick me up and throw me overboard."

"We can't do that," said the sailors, "it's against the Health and Safety Regulations. Besides, we'll be in big trouble with Hiram and Phyras if we drown one of our passengers. There's nothing about that in the brochure." But the storm got worse and worse and in the end, the sailors could do nothing but throw Jonah into the sea.

Immediately the storm stopped and the sea became calm so the sailors resumed their prayer meeting, this time all praying to Jonah's god, the God of Israel, thanking God for saving them and asking him not to blame them for Jonah having drowned.

After the big splash when Jonah hit the water, he went "Glug... glug... glug... glug..." and was just about down to his last glug when the most amazing thing happened. There happened to be swimming past that moment a huge creature.



It might have been a basking shark or some other large fish. It might have been one of the ancient sea monsters such as the Leviathan or the Taninim that Jonah had heard



stories about when he was a boy. But it's usually called a whale; so that's what we'll call it. It opened its mouth to take in a great mouthful of whatever food there was on offer and suddenly got more than it bargained for.

Jonah was a prophet with a ph, not a profit with an f. A prophet with a pH of more than seven was a basic prophet but those like Jonah with a pH of less than seven could be really sharp, quite acidic really. So the whale found Jonah quite indigestible; he just gave him a tummy ache.

They were miles out to sea and so the whale could only swim around and hope he would feel better soon. For three whole days and nights Jonah sat inside the whale's tummy while it swam here and there and he too felt very miserable. It was cold. It was dark. It was damp. It was smelly. If you've ever spent a Whet Wheekend in Whales you can imagine just how miserable Jonah felt.

He was pleased he hadn't drowned, though, and wondered what God was doing with him. He wanted to listen to God again but he was afraid he wouldn't like what he heard. So he said, "God, I'm sorry I ran away. Thank you for sending me this whatever-it-is to rescue me. If you give me another chance, I'll do what you want." Not long after, the whale swam in towards a long beach and opened its mouth in the shallow water. Jonah was very pleased to see the daylight and quickly clambered out onto the sand.

After a good bath and a change of clothes, he set off for Nineveh. He was still thinking that the horrible people of Nineveh wouldn't listen to him. Still, that would be their hard cheese. He would have done what God said and then he could go home. He was a small prophet so he would make a quick return.

When he got to the great city, he walked for a whole day before he stopped and began to speak to the crowds of people. "God is very angry with you," he told them, "because you keep breaking his golden rules and being nasty to each other. If you don't stop right away, there will be consequences." Jonah thought the people of Nineveh would laugh at him or even throw things at him but they didn't. Instead, they went to the king of Nineveh and told him what Jonah had said.

The king got together all his wise men and they agreed that they had better do something quickly. In those days, if you were really sorry for something you had done wrong, you would change out of your ordinary clothes and put on sack cloth and put some ashes from the fire on your head. It was very itchy but it reminded you how sorry you were. The king commanded that everyone in the city must stop what they were doing and put on sack cloth and ashes to show they were really, really sorry. The horses and donkeys didn't look sorry so they put sack cloth and ashes on them too, just to make sure.

Jonah didn't think it would last. He was still hoping that God would punish the people of Nineveh, not forgive them. He left the city and climbed up a hill where he had a good view of the whole place. He wondered what the consequences would be for breaking the golden rules. Perhaps there would be an enormous earthquake which would split the city in half. Perhaps a huge army of their enemies would come sweeping down from the hills and kill everyone. Or maybe there would be a flood which would wash them all away. He would just have to wait and see.

As the sun came up, Jonah became very hot. There was no shade and he didn't have a hat, let alone sun blocker. But then he noticed next to him on the ground there was a little green shoot. It seemed to be growing very quickly. Soon the shoot was up to Jonah's head and it bent over and sprouted a huge leaf.

Jonah was really pleased to have the shade of the leaf and it almost took his mind off waiting to see what God would do to punish the people of Nineveh. But then something else stirred from the ground. It was a hungry little worm. It climbed up on to the shoot and began to eat right through it. Before long, it had eaten right through and the leaf wilted and drooped over Jonah's head. Jonah felt very sorry for the nice little shoot that had covered him with its leaf and was quite upset because the worm had eaten it.

Then Jonah heard another of God's very quiet whispered messages. "Why are you so angry, Jonah?" asked God. "I have every right to be angry," replied Jonah, "because you haven't punished the horrible people of Nineveh. It's just typical of you, having compassion and showing mercy! I'm not pleased with you, God."

"You had compassion on the shoot and its leaf even though you didn't make them grow" said God. "Why shouldn't I have compassion on all these people of Nineveh who have shown they are really sorry and that they are going to start keeping my golden rules?"

So Jonah went home a changed man. He never did get to Tarshish. And from that day on, he always avoided whales.

THE END

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