

Jonah 1

“Unwelcome Assignments”

By Kent Crockett

www.makinglifecount.net

Jonah 1:1-2 The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise , go to Ninevah the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

God spoke to the prophet Jonah and gave him an unwanted, unwelcome assignment. He instructed Jonah to go to another country and preach to the city of Nineveh, but the prophet refused the offer. Instead of obeying, Jonah turned around and ran. And many people today are right behind Jonah, running from God’s assignment. What do you do when God gives you a do task to accomplish?

1. When God gives us an unwelcome assignment, we must accept it. (1:1-2)

An unwelcome assignment makes us feel uncomfortable because it usually involves risk or danger. But when God gives you a job to do, He will always give you the ability to complete the task, even when it looks impossible. That means we are going to have to trust Him in a greater way than ever before.

Here’s why Jonah didn’t want to go. Nineveh was a large city of about 600,000 people, and it was a very wicked. God said, “Their wickedness has come up before Me” (v.2). This statement tells us something. Although God is very patient with nations, He does keep track of wickedness and there comes a time when He’s had enough. He’s ready to bring judgment on that country if they won’t repent.

The Ninevites were extremely cruel. When they conquered in battle, they literally skinned people alive. It’s recorded that they would cut off the heads of their enemies and pile them up like a pyramid in front of the city. They would set their enemies’ women and children on fire. They would cut off people’s arms and hands, or gouge out their eyes, and cut off their ears, noses, or tongues to make sure their enemies could never fight again. Their cruelty became known throughout the world, and everyone in Israel was afraid of them, including Jonah.

You can imagine what went through Jonah’s mind when God tells him to go to Nineveh. “Lord, I like using my eyes, hands, and tongue. I don’t want to take a chance on being maimed, so I think I’ll pass on this job assignment.”

What would you do if God told you to be a missionary to terrorists who would dismember you? Would you do what He asks, or would you run? (The next time God asks you to do an unwelcome assignment, just remember how easy it is compared to Jonah’s assignment).

It’s amazing how quickly we will volunteer for the “serve the ice cream” job. It’s almost funny how clearly God speaks when it’s something that we **want** to hear. “Lord do you want me to buy that new car? Lord, do you want me to go on that week-long cruise to the Bahamas?” We can hear God’s voice and see confirmations everywhere. The birds tell us, the neighbors call—the confirmations are just everywhere.

But if God tells us to do something that we don't want to hear, we want 12 confirmations—and they've all got to be miraculous signs. In God's kingdom, someone has to do the tough jobs. But when God tells us He has an unwelcome assignment for us, we've already got a list of excuses ready. We want someone else to do it.

Our comfort zone is the greatest enemy to obeying God. Staying comfortable is usually our highest priority. It has gotten to where everything in our lives must be fun or we won't do it. We say, "God, you want me to do *what???* I'm sorry, but I just *don't feel comfortable* doing that." **For you to break out of your comfort zone, doing God's will must become more important than staying comfortable.**

When God gives us an assignment, we can give only one response: "Yes I'll do it," or "No, I won't do it."

Jonah 1:3 "But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord."

2. If we don't accept the assignment, we will run from God (1:3)

Jonah didn't want to do it, so he ran away from God. Instead of going to Ninevah, he ran in the opposite direction. Ninevah was about 500 miles to the east of Israel, so Jonah decides to go the other way.

Jonah went down to the travel agency and picked up a brochure that said, "Visit the beautiful city of Tarshish. Discount rates for disobedient prophets." Jonah thought, "I feel led to go there!" He boards a ship to Tarshish, which was in Spain about 2,500 miles to west of Israel. Tarshish was 3,000 miles from Ninevah.

Jonah is thinking, "If I can just get to Tarshish, everything will be okay."

Where is *your* Tarshish? Everybody has a mythical Tarshish in mind—where the grass is greener, the flowers are prettier, and problems don't exist.

Is your Tarshish another job? Another place to live? A different spouse? Discontentment always makes us want to run away from our present circumstances. We go on a search to find Tarshish. But God says, "I'm not going to bless your rebellion. You must do what I've called you to do!"

Jonah knew with certainty what the Lord wanted him to do. Some people say, "I know what I ought to be doing, but I'm just not ready yet." **James 4:17** says, "The one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin."

God has so many things that He wants us to do, but the laborers are few because they are unwelcome assignments. To be honest, the lowest form of commitment is to just attend church. It's not hard at all to drive to church and sit in seat for an hour or so. But if you want to grow spiritually, you must take a step up in commitment. You must make a commitment in your heart to start the task and bring it to completion.

3. When we run from God, we always pay a price.

Jonah 1:3 says he found a ship going to Tarshish and paid the fare to ride on the ship. The ticket price was called "peace and joy." Whenever we run from God it always

costs us something. **The cost of disobedience is far greater than the cost of obedience.**

A TV commercial some time ago advertised oil filters for cars. They showed a mechanic holding the oil filter and explaining how important it was to use a good oil filter whenever you changed your oil. In the background was a broken down car that mechanics were repairing. The mechanic held up the filter and said, “You can pay me now,” (by paying for the filter) and then he looked at the broken down car and said “or you can pay me later” (meaning you’ll pay him a lot more to fix the car).

In other words, you’re going to pay one way or the other, but it costs a whole lot more to pay to repair a car than replace a filter. In the same way, there’s a cost when you obey, and there’s a cost when you disobey. When we run from God, the cost is always more.

When we run from God, we must pay the ticket price, just like Jonah. The ticket of disobedience costs us our peace of mind. We get stressed out and edgy. We toss and turn at night and can’t get settled. We can have lots of money and tons of toys—but if we don’t have peace of mind, we’re going to be in turmoil. The second thing we lose is our joy, which often leads to hopelessness and depression. Psalm 16:11 says, “In Thy presence is the fullness of joy.” Because Jonah was fleeing from God’s presence, he was also fleeing from the fullness of joy.

4. God will rock your boat to get you to change your mind.

Jonah 1:4 The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.

If you’re on the wrong ship, you’re going to have a rough ride. Notice it says that the Lord caused the storm to happen. Things didn’t go as smoothly as Jonah had thought because God sent a storm to rock his boat. When we run from God, He will rock our boats to get our attention. This storm was so violent that the ship was about to break

Jonah 1:5-6 Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”

The captain wakes up Jonah who is down below and tells him to pray. Apparently he believed in the power of prayer and God’s ability to answer more than Jonah did!

Jonah 1:7 Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

They figured the storm was a result of someone on board who had done wrong. And guess what. They were right! They cast lots to find out who it was, and the lot fell on

Jonah. What are the odds of that happening by mere chance? God made sure all the arrows were pointing to Jonah, where it was obvious to everyone.

Jonah 1:8-11 Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?”—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

Jonah told them he feared the God **who made the sea** and land. He acknowledged that the Lord created the sea, which meant He also controlled the storm. Since the sea was becoming increasingly stormy, Jonah knew this was a sign that the Lord was after him. Circumstances will keep getting worse until we turn back to God.

Jonah 1:12 He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.”

Jonah says, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea.” I’ll bet Jonah was thinking, “*What did I just say???* Did I just tell them to throw me overboard?”

I believe it was at this point in time that Jonah had a change of heart. It was at this defining moment that Jonah changed his mind and decided he wasn’t going keep going to Tarshish.

True repentance always has a defining moment. It’s a moment when we decide we’re going to stop doing something and start doing something else. We know he repented at this time because this is the first time Jonah thought that others were more important than himself. He told the sailors, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea and it will become calm for you.”

How did Jonah know the storm would become calm? He was a prophet, and God must have told him. So here they are, with waves crashing over the ship, probably hundreds of miles from shore, and Jonah asks to be thrown overboard. He was willing to sacrifice himself so that everyone on the boat might be saved. This is what Jesus did for you—He sacrificed Himself that you might be saved.

Jonah went overboard in rebellion, and now he was about to go overboard in repentance. I’m sure God told him to go overboard and Jonah probably assumed that he was going to drown. We must obey God—even if we don’t understand what will happen to us. Jonah didn’t know that the Lord had prepared an underwater submarine to transport him back to Israel. When you’re truly repentant, you’ll do what’s right no matter what the consequences may be.

A few years ago, a man in Texas watched the movie about Jesus’ crucifixion, *The Passion of the Christ*. After the movie, he went to police and confessed that he

had murdered his girlfriend. Police had ruled it a suicide, and by confessing to the crime, he knew he would spend many years in prison.

After watching the same movie, a man in Florida confessed to robbing a bank and a man in Arizona confessed to police that he had robbed several stores and homes. All those people experienced a true change of heart by the Holy Spirit because they decided to admit their guilt, even though they would spend years in prison by confessing to their crimes.

Jonah 1:15-16 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

They throw him overboard and look what happens—the waves immediately become calm and the men on board are converted to God. This was proof to them that the God is Israel was real. The sailors on the ship were Jonah's first converts!

The passage says they greatly feared the Lord and were converted, and the first thing they do is **offer a sacrifice to God**. Since this was a long voyage, they probably had some animals on board that became their sacrifices. You can't worship God without giving Him a sacrifice of some kind. Then they **made vows**, which mean they committed themselves to following the Lord.

Jonah goes underwater and he hears da-da-da-da (Jaws theme). Then he sees a big mouth surround him and the lights go out. God appointed a great fish (literally a sea creature, probably a whale) to swallow him and bring him back home. This shows that God has control over animals. It was no accident that the whale was there to catch him at just the right time.

When Peter needed money to pay the temple tax, God sent a fish with a coin in its mouth to the right place so Peter could catch it and pay the tax. (Matt. 17:27)

When Peter denied Jesus three times, God sent a rooster to the courtyard to crow at the right moment, which fulfilled the prophecy Jesus had made.

Now when Jonah needed a ride back to Israel, He sent a whale as a submarine to transport him back, and then it torpedoed him onto the shore.

Jonah 1:17 The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights.

The whale swallows Jonah and he is in its belly for 3 days and 3 nights. Some people say, "There's no way that Jonah would stay alive under water for 3 days and 3 nights." And they're right. You see, Jonah **died** inside the whale. Next week we'll look Jonah 2:2 where it says he cried out to the Lord from **Sheol**. Sheol in the Old Testament is the place of departed spirits in the afterlife, where people went after they died. That verse indicates that Jonah died inside the whale. It's important to point out that Jesus said Jonah was a real person who really was swallowed, died, and came back to life.

Matt. 12:40 “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jonah was a type of Jesus. A “type” is a foreshadowing of a future person or event. This means over 800 years before Jesus came, God planned to use Jonah’s experience of being swallowed and inside the whale as a picture of Jesus’ death and being inside the tomb for 3 days and nights. Jonah was like an Old Testament Lazarus (John 11:17, 43-44) who was dead for several days and came back to life. I believe God gave Jonah his life back after he was vomited onto dry land (Jonah 2:10).

What assignment has God called you to do? How are you responding to it? Are you going to do what He says, or are you going to run and end up inside a whale?

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