



Taking Strides - Starting Over

The Place To Start

They say "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step." But I would also add, you better know where you and where you're going. If I am going to travel this journey of life with my Creator, and if I am going to move closer to Christ, then I need to know where to start.

The best—and only right—starting line is to find out where God is, and then to set your course by Him. He is the place to start. Think of the person you don't like the most, then ask "How does God feel about that person?" What do you think Jesus liked doing the most? Would you enjoy doing it as much as Jesus? The difference between you and God/Jesus tells you where you need to start and the direction you need to head.

Jonah's story is filled with people who want to live—in fact everyone *except* Jonah (yet he changed his mind when actually facing death). Everyone experienced the grace and compassion of God, but Jonah wanted it for himself and nobody else—well, at least not for those who don't deserve it. Jonah's starting point needed to be where God stood, with His heart. But instead he ran in the opposite direction. What about you?

Have you taken the Spiritual Life Survey yet? It will only be open between February 9-25. To take the online survey go to <http://www.revealnow.com/sl survey?uid=6611>. It will help all of us see where we are together in our journey with Jesus. We need your input, because it will help us know where we need to start over.

FOR DISCUSSION

Answer those two questions: How does God feel about the person you don't like the most? Would you enjoy doing the things that Jesus enjoys doing the most? Explain.

ENCOUNTER

Read God's Word so that He can speak to you.
Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. **1** But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. **2** He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. **3** "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."

4 The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"

5 Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. **6** So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

7 But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. **8** When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and

the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life." **9** Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." **10** Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. **11** "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

EXAMINE

what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- ✓ Put brackets [] around “turned” and “relented” in verse 10, then draw a line connecting them
- ✓ Underline the words that describe God’s character and the things God does to reveal His character
- ✓ Circle “angry”
- ✓ Draw a box around “extremely happy about the plant,” and “compassion on the plant”

EXPLORE

God’s Word by asking questions of what you saw. The notes which follow may help you to think through these questions.

1)

What does the story of Jonah tell us about the character/heart of God?

What does God do to get the attention of people and turn them back to Him?

2)

Did Jonah know these things about God? How did he experience them in his own life?

Then why did he run away? What do you discover about his heart?

3)

Do you know these things about God? How have you experienced them in your life?

Have you ever run away? Why? What did God do?

4)

Where is your heart in relation to God’s heart? If you were to have God’s heart and care for the things He does, what specific things should you be doing . . .

. . . concerning the people you dislike?

. . . concerning the people around you who are far from God?

. . . concerning the direction of your life?

5)

Jonah was given a chance to start over, and he did. If you are given a chance to start over—and you have been given it—where do you need to go to begin? Will you?

NOTES ON THE PASSAGE

(Adapted from Thomas Constable, *Expository Notes*)

3:4 - The essence of his proclamation was that Nineveh would be overthrown in only "40 days." Periods of testing in Scripture were often 40 days long (cf. Gen. 7:17; Exod. 24:18; 1 Kings 19:8; Matt. 4:2). Note that Jonah's message was an announcement of impending doom, not a call to believe in the God of Israel. Jeremiah 18:7-8 explains that prophecies of impending judgment assumed that those under judgment would not repent. If they repented, they might avoid the judgment (cf. Joel 2:12-14). Physical deliverance rather than spiritual salvation was what the people of Nineveh would have wanted. The same Hebrew word (*haphak*, overthrown, destroyed) describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:25. Possibly Jonah expected God to destroy Nineveh as He had overthrown Sodom and Gomorrah.

5 - The people "believed" and repented, apparently after only one day of preaching (v. 4), because of the message from God that Jonah had brought to them. Fasting and wearing "sackcloth" involved self-affliction, which demonstrated an attitude of humility in the ancient Near East (cf. 2 Sam. 3:31, 35; 1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1-2; Isa. 15:3; 58:5; Dan. 9:3; Joel 1:13-14). Sackcloth was what the poor and the slaves customarily wore. Thus, wearing it depicted that the entire population viewed themselves as *needy* (of God's mercy in this case) and *slaves* (of God in this case). This attitude and these actions marked all levels of the city's population (i.e., the chronologically old and young, and the socially high and low). The Ninevites did not want to perish any more than the sailors did (cf. 1:6, 14).

"God delights to do the impossible, and never more so than in turning men to Himself. Instead, then, of denying on the grounds of its 'human' impossibility the repentance that swept over Nineveh, let us see it as an evidence of divine power. For this, not the episode of the sea monster, is the greatest miracle in the book." (Frank E. Gaebelain, *Four Minor Prophets*, p. 103)

6 - Even "the king" responded by repenting. The "king of Nineveh" would probably have been the king of *Assyria*, since Nineveh was a leading city of that empire. He was probably one of the Assyrian kings who ruled during or near the re-

gency of Jeroboam II in Israel (793-753 B.C.): probably Ashur-dan III (Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 491-97).

10 - God noted the genuineness of the Ninevites' repentance in their actions. These fruits of repentance moved Him to withhold the judgment that He would have sent on them had they persisted in their wicked ways. Repentance is essentially a change in one's thinking. Change in one's behavior indicates that repentance has taken place, but behavioral change is the fruit of repentance and is not all there is to repentance (cf. Matt. 3:7-10). Nineveh finally experienced overthrow in 612 B.C., about 150 years later.

4:1 - This is the first clue, after Jonah's initial repentance and trip to Nineveh, that his heart was still not completely right with God. One can do the will of God without doing it with the right attitude, and that is the focus of the remainder of the book. The repentance and good deeds of the Ninevites pleased God, but they displeased His representative. They made God happy, but they made Jonah unhappy. A literal translation might be, "It was evil to Jonah with great evil." Until now evil (Heb. *ra'ah*) described the Ninevites, but now it marks the prophet. Consequently Jonah now became evil in God's eyes and in need of punishment as the Ninevites had (cf. Rom. 2:1), but God showed Jonah the same compassion He had shown the Ninevites.

It was not primarily because his announced judgment failed to materialize and so raised questions about his authenticity as a true prophet (cf. Deut. 18:21-22). Almost all prophecies of impending doom in the Bible assume that those being judged will remain unmoved. Divine punishment is avoidable provided people repent (cf. Jer. 3:22; 18:8; 26:2-6; Ezek. 18:21-22, 30-32; 33:10-15). Jonah undoubtedly became angry because he wanted God to judge the Ninevites and thereby remove a military threat to the nation of Israel. If he was aware of Hosea and Amos' prophecies, he would have known that Assyria would invade and defeat Israel (Hos. 11:5; Amos 5:27).

2 - Contrast this prayer with the one in chapter 2. This one is negative and defensive; the former one is positive and praiseful. This one focuses on Jonah, but the former one on God.

This one contains no fewer than nine references to "I" or "my" in the Hebrew. Jonah's description of God goes back to Exodus 34:6-7, a very ancient expression of God's character (cf. Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nah. 1:3). "Gracious" (from the Heb. *hen*, grace) expresses God's attitude toward those who have no claim on Him because they are outside any covenant relationship with Him. *Compassion*, one of the themes of this story, is a trait that Jonah recognized in God but did not share with Him as he should have. "Lovingkindness" (Heb. *hesed*) refers to God's loyal love to those who are in covenant relationship with Him. The prophet was criticizing God for good qualities that he recognized in God. He wished God were not so good.

3 - Jonah felt so angry that he asked God to take his life (cf. 1:12; 4:8, 9). How could Jonah return to Israel and announce that God was not going to judge the nation that had been such an enemy of the Israelites for so long?

4 - Jonah had condemned God for not being angry (v. 2), but now God challenged Jonah for being angry. Jonah was feeling the frustration of not understanding God's actions in the light of His character, which many others have felt (e.g., Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, et al.).

5 - The same Hebrew word for "shelter" (*sukka*) describes the leafy structures that the Israelites made for themselves for the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40-42; Neh. 8:14-18; cf. Mark 9:5). Did Jonah think that judgment might fall anyway, or was he waiting for God to clarify His actions? Perhaps he hoped that the Ninevites' repentance would evaporate quickly and that God would then call him to pronounce the judgment that he so wanted to see. Jonah did not know if the Ninevites' repentance would be sufficient to postpone God's judgment (cf. Gen. 18:22-33). He evidently took up residence somewhere on the slopes of the mountains that rise to the "east" of Nineveh to gain a good view of whatever might happen. Perhaps he expected to witness another spectacular judgment such as befell Sodom and Gomorrah. His shelter proved to be a classroom for the prophet similar to what the town dump had been for Job.

6 - This is the only time that we read that Jonah was "happy," and it was because he was physically comfortable. His anger grew out of his personal discomfort resulting from God's mercy on the Ninevites. The Hebrew word *ra'ah*, translated "discomfort" here, is the same word translated "evil" where it describes the Ninevites' evil (1:2; 3:8), and "displeased" where it

describes Jonah's displeasure over God's decision to spare the city (v. 1). Jonah's attitudes were as evil in God's sight as the Ninevites' actions.

7 - God had provided (Heb. *manah*, to appoint, provide, or prepare) a storm, a fish, a plant, and now a worm to fulfill His purpose. A different Hebrew word occurred in 1:4 describing the storm. He would next provide a *wind* (v. 8). Clearly God was manipulating Jonah's circumstances to teach him something.

8 - "During the period of a sirocco the temperature rises steeply, sometimes even climbing during the night, and it remains high, about 16-22°F. above the average . . . at times every scrap of moisture seems to have been extracted from the air, so that one has the curious feeling that one's skin has been drawn much tighter than usual. Sirocco days are peculiarly trying to the temper and tend to make even the mildest people irritable and fretful and to snap at one another for apparently no reason at all." (Dennis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, pp. 67-68)

Earlier he had wished to die because, as God's servant, he was not happy with God's will. Now he longed for death because he was unhappy with his circumstances. Divine discipline had brought him to the place where even the loss of a plant affected him so deeply that he longed to die.

9 - Evidently Jonah believed that God was not even treating him with the compassion that He normally showed all people, much less His chosen servants.

10 - "Compassion" (Heb. *hus*, concern [NIV], be sorry for [NEB], pity [RSV, RV]) is the key attitude. Jonah had become completely indifferent to the fate of the Ninevites. He knew His God well (4:2). Nevertheless, his appreciation for God's love for Israel had evidently so pervaded his life, that it crowded out any compassion for these people who lacked knowledge of, and relationship with, Yahweh. Furthermore, Jonah had announced that Israel's borders would expand under King Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). To reveal Jonah's lack of compassion to himself, God dealt with him as any ordinary person. He exposed him to the pleasures and discomforts that everyone faces, and made him see that his theology made him no more compassionate than anyone else. It should have. Knowledge of a sovereign, compassionate God whom He feared should have made Jonah more submissive to God's will, more compassionate toward other people, and more respectful of God.

11 - God's "compassion" extended not only to plants but also to people. The "120,000" people—that God cited as the special objects of His compassion—were probably the entire populace that did not know how to escape their troubles. The expression "do not know the difference between their right and left hand" is idiomatic, meaning: lacking in knowledge and *innocent* in that sense (cf. 2 Sam. 19:35; Isa. 7:15-16).

We normally have compassion for those with whom we can identify most closely, but God also has compassion on people who are helpless. Spiritually they are those who do not know God, those who are "lost." "God's question captures the very

intention of the book. The issue is that of grace—grace and mercy. Just as Jonah's provision was the shade of the vine he did not deserve, the Ninevites' provision was a deliverance they did not deserve based upon a repentance they did not fully understand." (Frank S. Page, "Jonah," in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, p. 286)

GOING FURTHER

One thing we can do to train ourselves to remember, is to memorize a part of what our Father has said to us. The Holy Spirit can use this to change our thinking so that our "heads" are more like Jesus.

This week, memorize Jonah 4:2.