
FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRUthe**BIBLE**

GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE

THE REAL STORY OF JONAH



DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

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If we were playing a Bible word association game and you got the word “Jonah”—what would you say? No doubt your response would be “whale.” But dig into this small book of Jonah with Dr. J. Vernon McGee and you’ll discover the whale is just a prop God used. The real story is so much better. It’s really about how the Lord gave Jonah a second chance. “Only God will do that—including for you and me,” Dr. McGee says. Let’s follow Jonah on His journey back to God.

The fish is neither the hero of the story nor the villain of the story. This book is not even about a fish, although the fish does become very important. The chief difficulty is in keeping a correct perspective. The fish is merely window dressing and cake trimming. In every play there are certain props and settings. It does not really matter whether Hamlet is played against a black, red, blue, or white backdrop—that is not the important thing. In the story of Jonah, the fish is among the props and does not occupy the star’s dressing room.

The book of Jonah is best organized like a timetable you'd see at a train station or airport. Three things are essential: The destination, the time of departure, and the time of arrival. It suits the four chapters of Jonah perfectly.

Chapter	Destination	Departing	Arriving
1	Nineveh	Jonah's hometown of Gath Hopher	The fish
2	Still Nineveh	The fish	Dry land
3	<i>Still</i> Nineveh	Dry land	Nineveh (at last!)
4	Outside the city of Nineveh	Nineveh	The heart of God

Note that “arriving” in chapter four; that’s a marvelous place for a backsliding prophet, preacher, or Christian to arrive—in the heart of God.

The heart of God—especially in giving second chances—is the message of the little book of Jonah.

PART 1

PASSAGE TO TARSHISH

We know more about Jonah, “the son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1), than most of the minor prophets. For instance, the prophecy of Obadiah tells us nothing about Obadiah. Isn’t it strange that the existence of Jonah is questioned but not Obadiah, when there’s not a historical record of him at all?

There is a clear historical record of Jonah in 2 Kings:

He [Jeroboam] restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher.

–2 Kings 14:25

His name is Jonah, he’s the son of Amittai, and Amittai was a prophet. These three points of identification prove this is the same man as in the book bearing his name.

Now if that were not enough, we also have an authority. As far as I’m concerned, when the Lord Jesus Christ says something, it’s final—I have no other place to appeal. In Luke 11:30 our Lord

says, “For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation.” This Jonah was a sign. Now there could not have been another man who lived as a sign. Our Lord treated him as a historical character, and I believe He was in a better position to know than any man in any seminary or university today. He is the authority, and He says this record in the book of Jonah actually took place.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”—Jonah 1:1, 2

God wanted to *save* Nineveh!

At the tower of Babel, God bade the world as a whole goodbye in order to concentrate on one family. In substance He said, “*I’ll have to leave you for a time, because I have to prepare a redemption for you.*” And that redemption came through the line of Abraham. The New Testament opens with this all-important genealogy: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).

God has prepared a redemption for man. The little book of Jonah is God saying to the world in the interval from the tower of Babel to the coming of Christ, “*I haven’t forgotten you. I’ll save you if you will turn to Me.*” The book of Jonah speaks of the most wicked, brutal people who have ever lived on this earth—the Assyrians. Yet God saved them! And if God would save them, He would save anyone who turns to Him.

PROBLEMS WITH JONAH

My problem is not with the fish. It’s nonsense to make that an issue today. We do well to keep separate the essentials and the incidentals. The essentials are Jonah and Jehovah; the fish is only a prop.

My trouble is with Jonah, and it begins here:

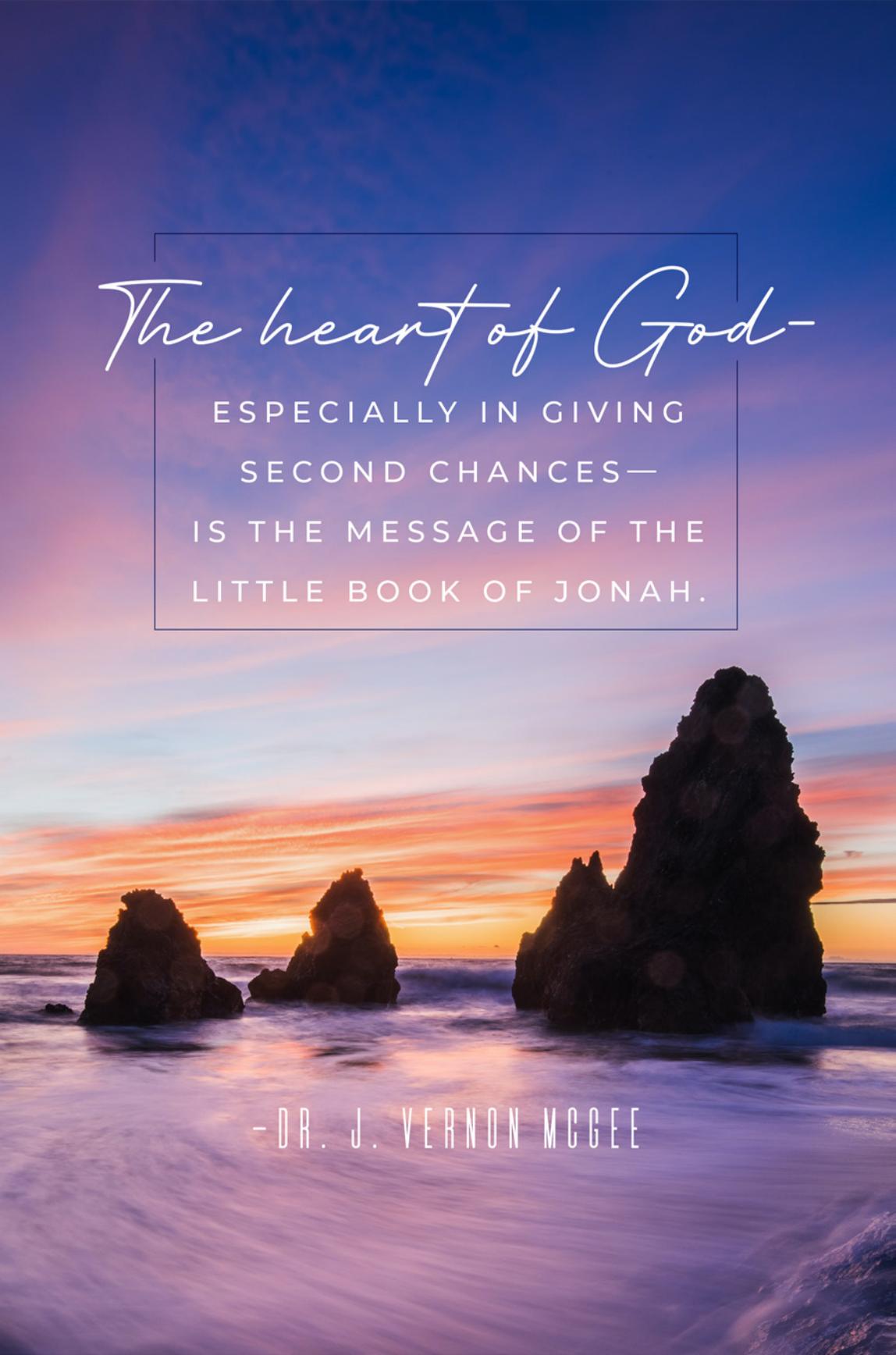
But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. –Jonah 1:3

This upsets our theology. Here is a prophet of God, called by God to go northeast to Nineveh, and instead Jonah goes in the opposite direction. He buys a ticket to Tarshish, which was in present-day Spain and the jumping-off place of the world in that day. It was believed you couldn't go any farther west than Tarshish, and that if you sailed out through the Pillars of Hercules you would sail off the earth and perish. So Jonah bought a ticket for a place as far away as he could go.

Why does this prophet of God go in the opposite direction of where he was called by God to go? Why in the world didn't the man do what God told him to do?

There are several explanations. The first is that Jonah hated Ninevites with a passion. He did not want them saved, and he had a reason for this. In the days of Jonah, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was subject to attack by Assyria. Detachments of the Assyrian army were making forays down into the Northern Kingdom, and they would capture an entire town and kill many of the inhabitants. And while I do not know this, I suspect Jonah was living in his hometown of Gath Hopher in the Northern Kingdom when the Assyrians came. He may have seen his own mother and father slain before his eyes and maybe brothers and sisters taken away captive. I do know this, he *hated* Ninevites. He was not interested in seeing them saved, so he went in the opposite direction, away from Nineveh.

Second, God never asked any Old Testament prophet to go as a witness to the world. One of the great distinctions between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament is the direction they are called to go. God never said to the prophets



The heart of God—

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of Israel, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Rather, their invitation was, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:3). And, my friend, the world came. The queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth. In the days of Solomon, the kings of the earth came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Israel witnessed to the world by having the world come to them. So Jonah would have been justified in asking, “*Look here, Lord, You never told Elijah to go up to Nineveh. Why do You ask me to do something you’ve never asked any other prophet to do?*”

The third reason is disturbing. Look in your own heart. We have a commission today to take the glorious news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Why are we going in the opposite direction? Let’s not talk about Jonah disobeying God when, as a whole, we have miserably failed in taking the gospel out to the lost world. Examine your own heart right now, and you’ll understand the human side of Jonah. We are not busy carrying out our commission, either.

THE STORM

Notice it says Jonah got on that ship “to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.” He probably told the sailors he was sure it was God’s will for him to go to Tarshish because the door opened. So often I hear, “We know God is leading us because we prayed about this, the door just opened, and everything else worked out beautifully for us.” It did? Well hallelujah for you, brother. But God doesn’t always lead like that. I’m disturbed when I hear other Christians tell me how easy they’re having it. That’s *not* a sign God is leading you.

My friend, when God leads He does not always do it through pathways strewn with flowers. He doesn’t always lead down a gentle slope with the stones removed from your path. Read the story of Abraham. He did well in Ur of the Chaldees until God called him, and then he started having trouble. Just because

someone is having trouble doesn't mean he is *out* of God's will. And just because everything is going easy in your life doesn't mean you're *in* God's will. My friend, learn from Jonah. Before you board a ship, be sure you're in the will of God.

You may remember the apostle Paul's final voyage to Rome and his encounter with a storm (see Acts 27). He counseled the captain of that ship not to go on. But when "the south wind blew softly," the captain ignored Paul's advice. You be careful when the south wind is blowing softly, Christian. May I say to you, that's right before the storm. My dad used to say in west Texas when we had to go to the storm cellar at night, "It's time to go!" And as kids we'd say, "But, Dad, it's quiet now." He would insist, "This is the time to go. It's the quiet before the storm hits."

Jonah found everything so nice and easy. May I say again, the south wind blows softly. But you should have seen the storm the apostle Paul got in. The ship was wrecked, and if Paul had not been there everyone on board would have lost his life.

However, notice who was responsible for the storm in Jonah's case:

But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. –Jonah 1:4

This storm was supernatural, just like the storm the devil used to try to destroy our Lord. Jesus was asleep in the boat, and the disciples on board were fishermen who knew the Sea of Galilee. They could have handled any boat in any storm they'd ever seen on that body of water, but this one they couldn't handle. Finally, in desperation they awoke Him, asking, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). The same sort of storm rocked Jonah's boat.

Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. –Jonah 1:5

I find this troubling. I have been told by the saints, “If you are a child of God and you get out of His will, you won’t be able to sleep at night. Your conscience will bother you.” Oh? Here’s Jonah—a backsliding prophet, called to go to Nineveh but on the way to Tarshish, out of the will of God—and he’s fast asleep! Everybody else is scared to death.

I say this carefully: There are Christians who have been out of the will of God for years, and they never miss a night’s sleep. Their conscience doesn’t bother them. They have been out of His will for so long they can even let obvious sins come in their lives, and it doesn’t disturb them. They go on keeping up a front. God have mercy on us today that we can have a conscience so seared that we can be spiritually cold and indifferent, and it doesn’t bother us.

So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.” –Jonah 1:6

This is embarrassing for Jonah. Imagine having the pagan captain of that ship come down and rebuke him because he is the one asleep when he should have been leading the prayer meeting! May I say to you, Jonah is really out of fellowship with God.

And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” –Jonah 1:7, 8

The sailors cast lots to find out who on board is responsible for the supernatural storm. The critic says, "That's superstition! You mean to tell me God will use superstition?" Yes, God will use superstition to accomplish His purpose. We have several examples of this in the Word of God. When God carried on a battle with Pharaoh in the days of Moses, He dealt with him in terms he could understand. Every one of the plagues was leveled at a particular idol in the land of Egypt. God communicated down on their level.

And when God wanted to speak to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who worshiped idols, how did He do it? Through an idol, that multi-metallic image Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. God came down to his level.

God wants to communicate with the human family more than He has ever wanted to before. I'm confident of that. And I think God uses many methods today to direct us.

When I was at my first pastorate in Nashville, Tennessee, we had in the Sunday school one of the most precious little girls I've ever seen. She had the meanest father I've ever met. He was a godless man. I went by his home one day to talk to him about the Lord. That was a great mistake. He ordered me out of his house, saying, "My religion is my business, and I don't intend to talk to you about it at all." So I decided this man was beyond being reached.

He ran a dry cleaning business, and one day his cashier told him she'd gone to see a fortune teller the night before. The fortune teller had told this woman she would die suddenly in an accident, and that her boss would die shortly afterward. A few days later, the cashier stepped off a curb and a car hit and killed her.

That unsaved fellow began to think he was next! He believed his time was short, and he became desperate. One night I heard my front door rattle so loudly I thought somebody was knocking

it down. When I opened the door, there stood this wild-eyed man. He came in and said, "You wanted to talk to me before about getting saved; now I want to listen."

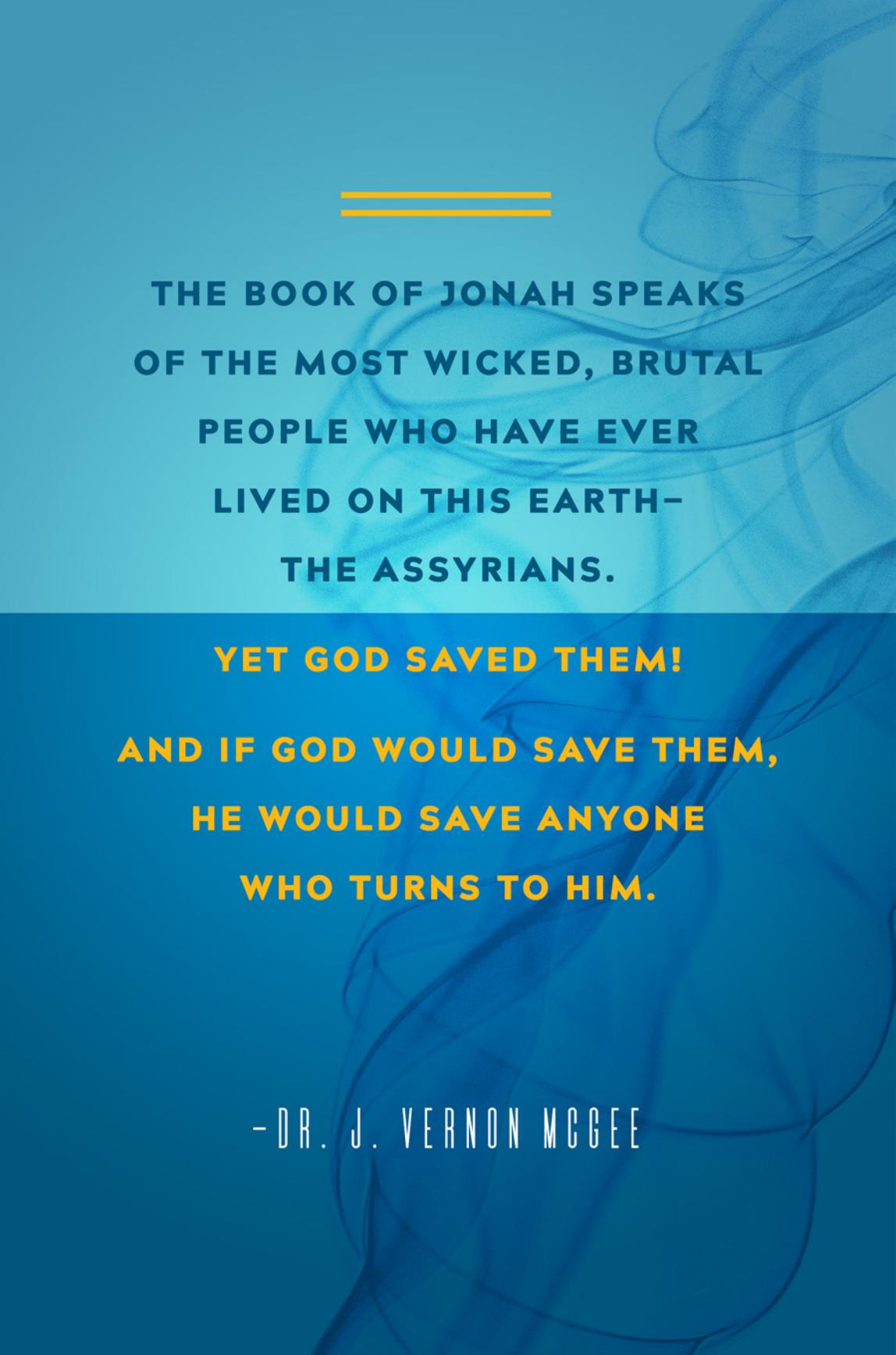
He'd once heard me preach on the dispensations, which interested him, so he asked me to explain them. I got a piece of brown wrapping paper and a pencil, and we both got down on our knees on the floor while I drew a chart of the dispensations like I always use. We went from the dispensation of creation to the dispensation of innocence, the dispensation of conscience, then promise, then the Law, and then we came to grace. That's when I began to talk to him about the fact that God, in this age of grace, was asking of man nothing but faith, that we need only to trust Christ as Savior. When I looked up from the chart and into his face, I saw by his expression that he was ready to be saved. So I said to him, "Wouldn't you right now like to accept Christ as your Savior?" He said, "I sure would." We didn't even have to get down on our knees because we were already there, and right there and then that man received Jesus Christ as his Savior. I know it was genuine, because he was a changed person afterward.

My friend, God used a fortune teller who, to my judgment, was as fake as they come. But it was the means of bringing to Christ the father of a precious child in our Sunday school. I'm confident nothing else would ever have brought him to the Lord. God will get down to your level if it means reaching you, my friend.

Now back in the days of Jonah, God used the superstition of casting lots to reach a bunch of pagan sailors. When the lot fell on Jonah, they began pelting him with questions.

Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

-Jonah 1:8



**THE BOOK OF JONAH SPEAKS
OF THE MOST WICKED, BRUTAL
PEOPLE WHO HAVE EVER
LIVED ON THIS EARTH—
THE ASSYRIANS.**

**YET GOD SAVED THEM!
AND IF GOD WOULD SAVE THEM,
HE WOULD SAVE ANYONE
WHO TURNS TO HIM.**

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

Jonah was a talkative fellow when he first came aboard, but he hadn't told them the thing he should have told them. We never hear him telling them God could save them. They never would have asked him what nationality he was if he had told them he was a Hebrew, because that would have revealed his religion as much as his nationality. If Jonah had just said to them, "I'm a Hebrew," it would have opened the door for him to witness. But he didn't witness for God; instead he talked about other things. It's amazing when you are out of fellowship with God that you don't want to talk about Him—any more than the unsaved man wants to talk about Him, by the way.

So he said to them, "I am a Hebrew [and that gave it all away] and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." –Jonah 1:9

These men were idolaters. They worshiped the sun, moon, and stars. Now Jonah tells them he does not worship these things, but he worships the Creator of these things, the Maker.

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. –Jonah 1:10

When you, as a child of God, are out of the will of God, you'll rationalize your actions. And if you rationalize your actions, you're going to confide in somebody. Have you ever done that? You're not sure about what you're doing, so you go and talk it over with somebody—maybe a friend or your pastor. I'm confident a great many folk who have come to me for counseling did not want my advice. They only wanted me to agree with what they had already decided to do.

I have a notion that when the ship got underway, Jonah looked for someone to take his side and reassure him he was doing the right thing. Maybe he chatted with the captain about how awful and unworthy the Ninevites were, looking for affirmation that

he'd made the right choice in running in the opposite direction. That's rationalizing, friend. And once he got confirmation from someone, he went away feeling good enough to fall fast asleep.

MAN OVERBOARD

But now in the midst of the storm, Jonah is on deck and has been singled out as the reason for the ship's terrible predicament.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous. And 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 this great tempest is because of me."—Jonah 1:11, 12

Jonah knew now that God was speaking to him.

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them.—Jonah 1:13

Some would say these pagan sailors were uncivilized, but they act very civilized to me. They did not want to throw Jonah overboard. In their hearts they were saying, "Oh, no, not that! We'll make another effort to try to get this boat into port somewhere."

Therefore they cried out to the Lord ...

Do you notice what's happening? They're crying out now to the Lord! Something did happen, didn't it? These pagan sailors are not bowing down to an idol to ask for mercy, nor are they entreating the sun, moon, and stars; but they're speaking now to the Creator.

... and said, "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You."—Jonah 1:14

In other words, they are calling upon God to forgive them for what they are going to do because they have no alternative.

So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. –Jonah 1:15

You can be sure these men were startled at the sudden calm! This was a positive confirmation that the storm was supernatural.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows. –Jonah 1:16

Did they fear their gods? No. They feared the One who is the Creator of the sea and of the land. I believe these men came to a knowledge of the living and true God. They did two things: They made “a sacrifice to the LORD,” which pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ. And I believe in the best way they could, with the little knowledge they had, they looked in faith to God.

Then they “took vows.” A vow in the Old Testament was very important. I had this impressed on my mind when studying the book of Leviticus. And the writer of the Proverbs says when you make a vow to God be sure you pay it, because if you don’t, He will hold you to it. God doesn’t like anyone making an idle vow to Him, and that’s my reason today for believing we ought to be very careful of what we promise God. Oh, how many people under the emotion of the moment make a promise to God that they never keep. I believe God holds us to our vows. These sailors made vows, which means in Old Testament language that they not only came to the true God at this time with a sacrifice, but they also promised to serve Him. These men, through this tremendous experience, turned to the living and true God.

So something good was accomplished by the storm, by Jonah’s being on board the ship, and by his being cast overboard. But the mariners disappear over the horizon, and we do not know what actually happened to them.

THE REAL MIRACLE OF THE FISH

But we do know what happened to Jonah.

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

–Jonah 1:17

Here is the crux of this story. It has been assumed Jonah spent three days and three nights inside the fish like you would spend a weekend in a comfortable motel—that somehow or other he spent three days alive inside the fish.

Years ago I took the position I still hold today: Jonah was not alive inside the fish, but he died and God raised him from the dead. I have been verbally attacked for this position. In fact, a theological professor said because Jonah was a backsliding prophet, he could not have been a type of Christ. Yet this same professor taught that King David is a type of Christ. I think Jonah makes a better type of Christ than David, if you're going to measure him by the sin in his life. Neither of them is a type of Christ when it comes to their sin or their backsliding. Jonah is a type in only one area, and that is in his death and resurrection. That's the way the Lord Jesus put it when He was asked for a sign. He said,

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. –Matthew 12:39, 40

Now, my friend, was the Lord Jesus alive or dead? “Well,” you say, “He was dead for three days.” Yes. Was Jonah alive or dead? He had to be dead in order to bear out what our Lord says in Matthew 12.

The book of Jonah does not make it clear that this man was alive for the three days. If I'm wrong, and in heaven one day Jonah comes to me and says, “Boy, you sure got it wrong. I was alive in that fish!” then I'll say, “I'm sorry. But you should have made it a lot clearer for this poor preacher.”

If Jonah had stayed alive inside the fish, that would not have been a miracle. You say, "Not a miracle?" No. There are several accounts on record of men being swallowed by large fish and living to tell the tale. Grace W. Kellogg, in her excellent little booklet on the subject, *The Bible Today*, has compiled a list of the records—which have been authenticated—of the experiences of living creatures in fish who later were rescued alive:

There are at least two known monsters of the deep who could easily have swallowed Jonah. They are the Balaenoptera Musculus or sulphur-bottom whale, and the Rhinodon Typicus or whale shark. Neither of these monsters of the deep has any teeth. They feed in an interesting way by opening their enormous mouths, submerging their lower jaw, and rushing through the water at terrific speed. After straining out the water, they swallow whatever is left. A sulphur-bottom whale, one hundred feet long, was captured off Cape Cod in 1933. His mouth was ten or twelve feet wide—so big he could easily have swallowed a horse. These whales have four to six compartments in their stomachs, in any one of which a colony of men could find free lodging. They might even have a choice of rooms, for in the head of this whale is a wonderful air storage chamber, an enlargement of nasal sinus, often measuring seven feet high, seven feet wide, by fourteen feet long. If he has an unwelcome guest on board who gives him a headache, the whale swims to the nearest land and gets rid of the offender as he did Jonah.

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* recently quoted an article by Dr. Ransom Harvey who said that a dog was lost overboard from a ship. It was found in the head of a whale six days later, alive and barking. Frank Bullen, F.R.G.S., who wrote, *The Cruise of the Cathalot*, tells of a shark fifteen feet in length which was found in the stomach of a whale. He says that when dying the whale ejects the contents of its stomach.

| WE HAVE A

COMMISSION

TODAY TO TAKE

THE *GLORIOUS*

NEWS OF

JESUS CHRIST

TO THE ENDS

OF THE EARTH.



- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

The late Dr. Dixon stated that in a museum at Beirut, Lebanon, there is a head of a whale shark big enough to swallow the largest man that history records! He also tells of a white shark of the Mediterranean which swallowed a whole horse; another swallowed a reindeer minus only its horns. In still another Mediterranean white shark was found a whole sea cow, about the size of an ox.

These facts show that Jonah could have been swallowed by either a whale or a shark. But has any other man besides Jonah been swallowed and lived to tell the tale? We know of two such instances.

The famous French scientist, Msr. de Parville, writes of James Bartley, who in the region of the Falkland Islands near South America, was supposed to have drowned at sea. Two days after his disappearance, the sailors made a catch of a whale. When it was cut up, much to their surprise they found their missing friend alive but unconscious inside the whale. He revived and has been enjoying the best of health ever since his adventure.

Another version of the James Bartley experience has been recorded in *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, 1971 edition:

We were recently reminded of the true story of a man swallowed by a whale who lived to tell about it! It concerns one James Bartley, a crewman aboard *The Star of the East*, a whaling ship off the Falkland Islands in February of 1891. Bartley was a member of the boat crew that was overturned by a large bull whale already wounded by a harpoon thrust. When another boat picked up the survivors, Bartley and one other man were missing. Later that afternoon, two other boats saw the same whale, captured it and drew it alongside. *The Star of the East* Captain, Mike Dolan, describes what then took place:

“With lines around its stomach, the crew hoisted the whale to the deck of the ship. Something moved inside the covering. Working feverishly with sharp knives, they quickly slit the stomach of the whale open and found James Bartley quivering and unconscious.

“Dashing salt water over the still form of Bartley they seemed to revive him. After he had been washed and a few sips of brandy forced through his pale lips, he was carried to the ship’s cabin.

“For two weeks he hovered near death. When he finally recovered, he told a weird tale.

“Remembering being dashed high in the air when the giant whale struck the boat with his tail, Bartley said he heard a rumbling sound like a train roaring over a bridge. He imagined the noise was caused by the whale pounding the sea. In the darkness he said he made an effort to reach out and his hand touched a slick substance which yielded to his feeble efforts to escape. Then he felt himself being drawn forward into a chamber where there was more air.

“Each time he tried to crawl forward in the black chamber some invisible force seemed to draw him back. Then his terrible plight dawned upon him. He was inside the body of a whale. The heat was terrific. Weak from the strain and the heat, he sank into oblivion. Death seemed dreadfully near. He collapsed and remembered nothing until he awakened in the ship’s cabin. And although his skin never quite regained its natural color, he regained his strength and lived for many years, continuing to fish in the dangerous waters where he almost met his doom.”

So, was Jonah alive or dead inside the fish?

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish’s belly.

–Jonah 2:1

Before you decide my theory is already shot down, consider this question: When did he pray? Did he pray on the third day? If that's the way it happened, I admit my theory is no good at all, because he would have to be alive if he prayed this on the third day. When would you have prayed if you had been swallowed by the fish? Would you have waited until the third day? May I say to you, before I got through the gullet of that fish and dropped into his tummy, I would not only have prayed the prayer, but I would have covered the book of Jonah, something you can do in three minutes. My friend, Jonah prayed this *before* he lost consciousness.

I have a friend who was for years a pastor in Tennessee. His index finger had been cut off, and it was nothing more than a stub below the second joint. When anyone asked him about his call to the ministry, he would hold up that little stub and wave it. Then he would tell the story of his call to the ministry.

His father was an elder in the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Memphis. They were having evangelistic meetings in the church, and to obey his dad he would go every night and sit on the second row. He said, "That evangelist was getting to me, and I knew if I stayed another night I would accept Christ as my Savior. I also knew that if I did accept Christ as my Savior I would go into the ministry, and at that time I did not want to. So after everybody in the family had retired for the night, I put my extra shirt under my arm, slid down the rain gutter from my upstairs bedroom, and headed for Mississippi." He found work in a sawmill down there, and his job was to take great logs and run them on the conveyor to the saw.

One day they ran out of good logs. They had some put aside that were inferior, and they decided to run those through as second class or third class lumber. He was rolling one of these logs, and just as he let it drop onto the conveyor belt his index finger caught in a gash in the wood. The gash snapped shut, and it held him. He found himself being pulled toward that great band saw. He said, "I yelled at the top of my voice, but by that

time the other end of the log had hit the saw, and no one could hear me. There I was—helpless. Between there and that saw, I covered my entire life. I prayed to the Lord and asked Him for forgiveness for every sin I'd ever committed. I accepted Him as Savior; I agreed to go in the ministry; I made any other promises the Lord wanted me to make. Since it takes only 45 seconds for a log to go through, I did all of that in 45 seconds!"

When you get in trouble, it's amazing the amount of ground you can cover! When the saw got to the place where his finger was, it cut off his finger. That released him, and he rolled to the side. "I hit the ground running. I did go by the doctor's office, but then I didn't stop running until I got back home and told my dad what I'd done. And I started studying for the ministry. *That* was my call to the ministry."

My friend, don't you know that Jonah prayed his prayer the minute he went inside that fish? Then he lapsed, I'm sure, into unconsciousness and then death. And God raised him from the dead. He was dead inside the fish; he didn't spend a weekend in a comfortable motel. This man spent time in the tummy of a fish, being churned up and down. He says,

... The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. –Jonah 2:6

Does that sound like he was alive in there?

PART 2

GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE

I want to write Luke 11:30 over this section:

For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation.

When Jonah arrived in the city of Nineveh, he not only had a message, he was a message. He was a sign to the Ninevites. Keep that in mind as we get into this third chapter of the book of Jonah.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time....

–Jonah 3:1

I know some folk who consider this verse their favorite in the Bible. You may wonder why this could be the favorite verse of anyone. Suppose our government had commissioned a general to carry a message, and he disobeyed as Jonah did. Would they trust him with orders a second time? I don't think so. He'd be dishonorably discharged. Or say a bank teller absconded with funds, ran off and had a vacation, and then came back empty handed. Would she get another chance? No.

A large, multi-masted sailing ship is shown on a foggy sea. The ship has three masts and is partially obscured by the mist. The background is a soft, hazy blue and white, suggesting a calm but slightly overcast day. The ship's name, "THE JONAH", is faintly visible on its hull.

My friend,

LEARN FROM JONAH.

BEFORE YOU BOARD A SHIP,

BE SURE YOU'RE IN THE

WILL OF GOD.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time.” Aren’t you glad, beloved, that God will give you a second chance?

In a parallel situation, I have never read of the prodigal son asking his dad to stake him the second time or the third time to go out into the far country. He had one fling and that was it, because he was a son of the father. And Jonah, this backsliding prophet, is now on the way to Nineveh, I can assure you of that. He is going there to give God’s message.

Our is the God of the second chance. *He* gives us a second chance. And, by the way, He gives us more than two. I’m working somewhere up in the hundreds. I do not know exactly where, but I’m working way up there. God has been so gracious to me! He gives us many chances, and He has always done that. For instance, you may remember Jacob in the book of Genesis. God had made wonderful promises to that man, yet he failed God again and again. But God would not let him go. And one night at the Brook Jabbok, God crippled his leg to get him. God would not give him up.

David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, committed an awful sin. Many feel God made a terrible blunder choosing David and letting him have a second chance. Without question, the double sin he committed was awful. The Bible doesn’t tone it down. But aren’t you glad God gave him a second chance? If He had not, we wouldn’t have Psalm 23; we wouldn’t have Psalm 32; we wouldn’t have Psalm 51; and we wouldn’t have almost a hundred other psalms, for David wrote most of these psalms following that experience. And you don’t read about David continuing to live in disobedience to God. David slipped, and God gave him a second chance.

Simon Peter stumbled and fell, and our Lord had even warned him:

“... Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail...” –Luke 22:31, 32

Yet Simon Peter was given the privilege of preaching the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost when 3,000 men came to Christ. God gave him a wonderful lifelong ministry. God did not give him up.

John Mark is an example in the Scriptures of one who failed. He was on the first missionary journey with Paul and his uncle Barnabas, whose name means “son of consolation.” But when John Mark looked out on that frightful wilderness of Asia Minor, he showed a yellow streak down his back and headed home to mama. So when they were ready for the second journey, Barnabas said, “*Let’s take John Mark with us again and give him another chance.*” Paul’s response was, “*Absolutely not! Do you think I would take a man who failed so spectacularly on the first missionary journey? I won’t give him another chance.*” But Uncle Barnabas took him anyway. The team of Paul and Barnabas split over John Mark because Paul wouldn’t have him. But Paul was proven wrong. And there came the day when Paul acknowledged it—in fact, in his swan song he wrote, “...Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Isn’t that a wonderful thing—John Mark made good! God didn’t give him up after his first failure. God gave him another chance.

There are untold numbers of people to whom the word of the Lord has come the second time, giving them a second chance. Only God will do that—including for you and me.

PUTTING IT ON THE LINE

Now that God has given him his second chance, let’s follow Jonah as he is sent into Nineveh to give one of the most startling messages that city ever heard.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” –Jonah 3:1-4

Here's Jonah, a man with a message from God that will shock everyone who hears it. His only problem is, how would he get a crowd? He was not known by anyone in the city of Nineveh. So how would a prophet of God, going into a huge pagan city, get anyone's attention?

Well, let me remind you that Jonah *had just spent three days inside a fish.*

I have given one account of a man being swallowed by a fish near the Falkland Islands. But, let me briefly give you another. Dr. Harry Rimmer, president of the Research Science Bureau in Los Angeles, writes of another case. "In *Literary Digest* we noticed an account of an English sailor who was swallowed by a gigantic Rhinoden in the English Channel. Briefly, the account stated that in an attempt to harpoon one of these monstrous sharks the man fell overboard, before he could be picked up again, the shark turned and engulfed him. Forty-eight hours after the accident occurred, the fish was sighted and slain. When the shark was opened by the sailors, they were amazed to find the man unconscious but alive! He was rushed to the hospital where he was found to be suffering from shock, and a few hours later was discharged as being physically fit."

Dr. Rimmer was in London, England, two years after that, and this man was being advertised as the Jonah of the twentieth century. When Dr. Rimmer went to see him, he noticed he was very strange, in fact, startling looking! He didn't have a hair on his body, and his head looked like a billiard ball. His skin was covered with patches of a peculiar yellowish brown color. Dr. Rimmer said you would notice him anywhere he'd go, and that was two years after he had been inside the fish.

Inside that fish the gastric juices had been working on Jonah's skin for three days and three nights. I want to tell you, as he entered the city of Nineveh, he was a sight to see! I think when Jonah came to a street corner and stopped to wait for a light,

the people gathered around him and said, “Brother, where have you *been?*” It didn’t take him long to gather a crowd. He probably said, “I’m a man who has come back from the dead to bring you a message from God.” Then he’d give them his experience, following it up with, “I’m back here to tell you that in forty days this city is to be destroyed.”

May I say to you, the entire population of that city began to listen to this strange-looking man. Our Lord says he was a *sign* to these Ninevites.

WHEN GOD RELENTS

Even more startling than the message, more sensational than the fish or anything else in the story, is the reaction of the people.

So the people of Nineveh believed God... –Jonah 3:5

Friend, had I been the head of a mission board sending out missionaries in that day and somebody said to me, “Why don’t you send one of your missionaries into Nineveh?” I would have said, “There’s no use sending a missionary there. It wouldn’t do a bit of good!” You might look at the brutality and sin in that city and say it’s hopeless, too.

God didn’t think so. He wanted a message brought to this city, and the people of Nineveh believed God.

Think this over very carefully. Did you know all God ever asked any of us to believe is that He gave His Son to die on the cross for us? If we will receive Him, God says, “I’ll save you.” All He asks a sinner to do is just *believe* Him! That’s all. Isn’t it interesting that we readily believe what people say and yet find it difficult to believe what God says? “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater....” (1 John 5:9). But these godless, brutal people of Nineveh believed God!

So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." –Jonah 3:5-8

All the way from the king on the throne to the peasant in the hovel, this entire city—noted for its violence, hated throughout the world—turned to God, and when they did, they turned *from* their evil ways.

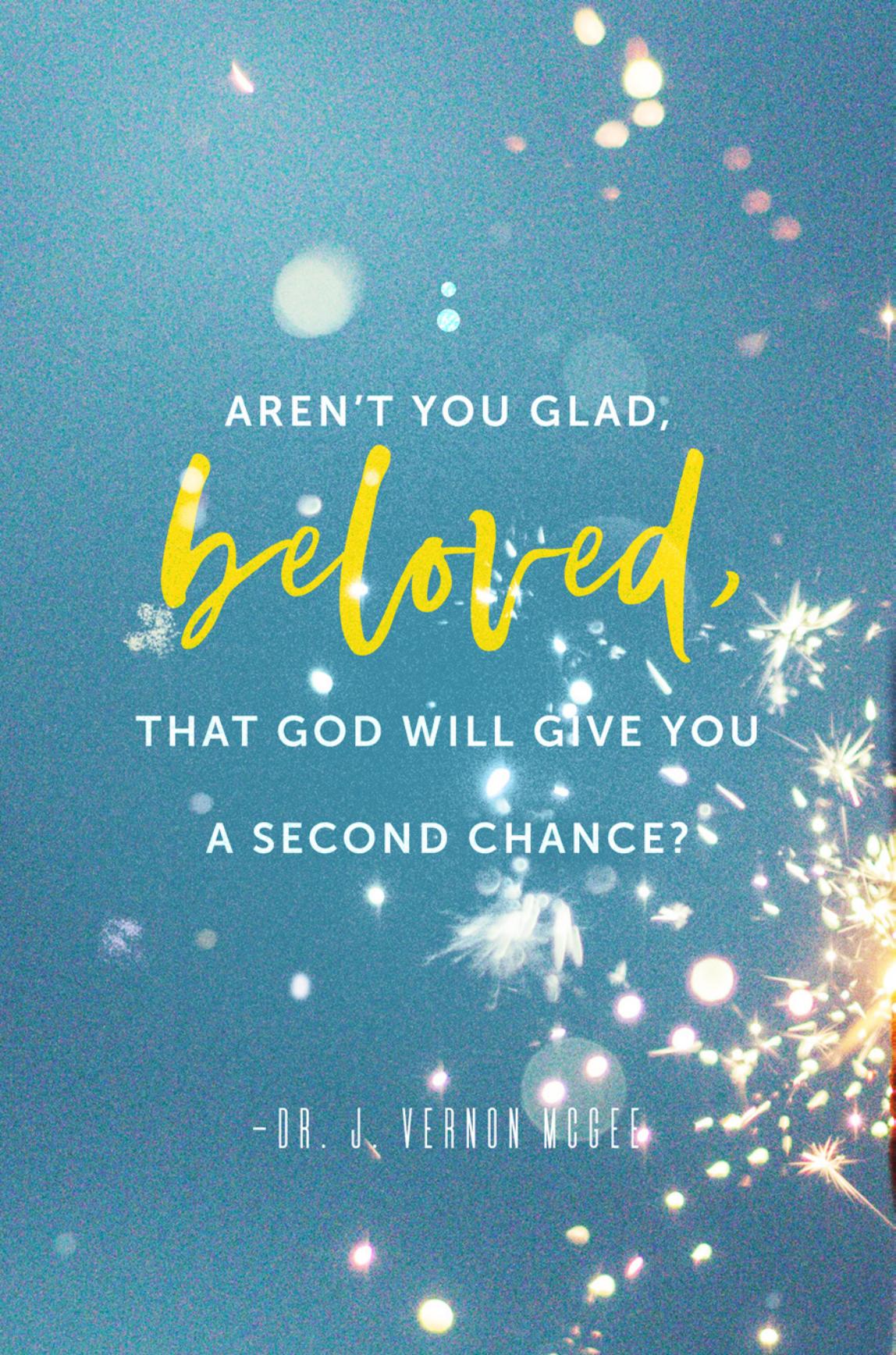
Friend, there is nothing else like this on record anywhere. There has never been a great turning to God to equal this.

WHY NINEVEH?

Why did God choose this wicked city? The examples given to us in Scripture are always extreme. Whom did God choose to save in the city of Jericho? He picked Rahab, the harlot. I heard a man speaking on the radio who sure cleaned up Rahab's character. He said she was merely an innkeeper running a motel. May I say to you, that's not what the Bible says. But God saved her. Why? Because she believed God.

And God saved the entire city of Nineveh—a brutal, pagan, heathen city—to let the Gentile world know He will save *anybody* who will turn to Him and believe Him. That still holds good today.

Now the king's word went throughout Nineveh and the entire city went into sackcloth and ashes, crying out to God for mercy because they believed God. And what happened?



AREN'T YOU GLAD,

beloved,

THAT GOD WILL GIVE YOU

A SECOND CHANCE?

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

“Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?” Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. –Jonah 3:9, 10

God said He would destroy Nineveh, but He did not. The only prophecy of Jonah that we have recorded is, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” But it wasn’t overthrown. God did not destroy Nineveh. So, did Jonah give a wrong prophecy? No, it was a right prophecy. Then did God change His mind? Was God wishy-washy?

Someone asked Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, “Dr. Morgan, is God as changeable as a weathervane?” His reply was, “You used the wrong illustration. A weathervane is not changeable. It never changes. It operates according to a law that says it doesn’t make any difference which way the wind will blow, the weathervane always points in the direction the wind is going. It is the wind that does the changing.”

Who really changed? God or Nineveh? The weathervane turned to Nineveh because God will always save when people turn to Him. He *has* never changed; He *will* never change. And if they don’t turn to Him, He will do what He promised—He will judge.

If you want the sequel to the story of Jonah, read the little prophecy of Nahum written a hundred years later. It is the judgment of Nineveh. By then, the city had again turned from God, and this time they did not repent of it. The revival was gone. Judgment came, and Nineveh was left in ruins. Even the ruins were lost to civilization until the city was excavated in the nineteenth century.

It does not matter which way the wind is blowing in your life, God never changes. He will save any sinner who will come to Him in faith. The writer to the Hebrews assures us that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

PART 3
TO THE HEART OF GOD

Jonah had a remarkable experience no other man has ever had. From Noah's preaching down to the preaching of Billy Graham, no one has ever seen one hundred percent saturation of the Word of God bring one hundred percent conversion. But Jonah did. He had the experience of seeing an entire city turn to God.

JONAH IS DISPLEASED

If you and I had that experience, I think we would immediately send a message back to Jerusalem: *"Rejoice with me. The revival is here! It's broken out in the city of Nineveh!"* You'd think Jonah would have done something like this. But no. Chapter 4 opens with a startling statement. This, to me, is the strangest part of the book of Jonah:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.

—Jonah 4:1

Now God has more problems with this backsliding prophet than He had with the entire population of Nineveh. Why was he displeased? If I had been in Jonah's shoes, and if I had been in Jonah's fish, I might have felt the same way he did. This Scripture gives us some insight into the heart of Jonah.

So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish"

There have been commentators who said the reason Jonah acted as he did is that he really didn't know God. But Jonah makes it clear the problem is that he *did* know God. Listen to him:

... for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. –Jonah 4:2

Oh, my friend, you and I haven't any conception of how gracious and merciful our God is and how He longs to save. But, you see, He is a holy God, and He has made one way for a man to be saved. The apostle Peter in speaking of Jesus said, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is the message that must be gotten out if folk are to experience the mercy of God and know the grace of God. Because, my friend, apart from Jesus Christ a frightful, awful eternity is before every individual. And it would be before us today if Christ had not borne that judgment death for us upon the cross.

Notice that Jonah says, "You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." In other words, when God called him to go to Nineveh and speak to that city and tell them that because of their wickedness God would destroy them, Jonah knew what would happen.

The Ninevites were evil people. You talk about violence and lawlessness! This city was given over to it. It was dreaded and feared in the ancient world. When the Assyrian army moved against a city, sometimes an entire population in a community would commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of those brutal Assyrians. Jonah knew God was merciful and would save even Ninevites. And Jonah says in effect, *“I don’t trust those rascals. They might say they’ve turned to God, and then not do it. Or they might sincerely turn to God, and if they do, God will save them.”* He did not want the Ninevites to be saved, so he headed in the opposite direction. But then God gave him a second chance to do His will, detouring him around and sending him to Nineveh despite his mindset.

Now, having done his assignment, listen to this man. He concludes his prayer by saying,

Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live! –Jonah 4:3

May I say to you, I think at this point he’s the most miserable person on topside of the earth. Actually, the most miserable people in the world are Christians out of the will of God. Dwight L. Moody, in his quaint way, used to put it like this: “Some people have just enough religion to make them miserable.” And other people may actually be saved, but are certainly not enjoying the ride to heaven. Neither are they being used of God. I won’t question Jonah’s salvation, because he is God’s man. But, again, God had more trouble with this backsliding prophet than He did with the entire city of Nineveh. But God was going to work on His prophet.

I think God’s method with Jonah may still be His method, “for He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). God knows us, and He knew Jonah. God understands human nature, especially fallen human nature. He understands this old nature that you and I inherited from Adam when he rebelled against God.

Listen to the Lord's response to Jonah:

Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" –Jonah 4:4

In my judgment, Dr. G. Douglas Young has the best translation here: "Is doing good displeasing to thee?"

So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter.... –Jonah 4:5

He's in a huff now; he doesn't like what God said to him. He's out of fellowship with God, and you can be sure of one thing—he doesn't have a friend in the city of Nineveh. His hometown is several hundred miles away, he is homesick, and he is lonely. This is the time when God is going to move in on this man.

Jonah made a little shelter to live in outside the city. We know the topography of the area was extensive and supported a great population, and the land was all irrigated. I think Jonah went up on the hill, which was the protection for the city. He wanted to get a good seat up at an elevation where he could look out over the city, intending to stay there until the fire fell from heaven, because he didn't believe the Ninevites were sincere. And while Jonah knows God and that He is merciful to save the Ninevites, he also knows God will judge them if they are not genuine. And Jonah is so sure they will go back to their old sins, he is out there waiting.

GOD IS GRACIOUS

There sits this lonely, backsliding prophet, so unhappy he'd like to die.

So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a plant [in some versions called a gourd] and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. –Jonah 4:5, 6



IT DOES NOT MATTER
WHICH WAY THE WIND IS
BLOWING IN YOUR LIFE,
GOD NEVER CHANGES.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

This plant, this gourd vine, is as miraculous as the fish. The record tells us the fish was prepared, and the gourd also was prepared. One is just as miraculous as the other. Now, friend, Jonah got attached to that little gourd plant. You see, it was God who made this gourd sprout up and grow. Jonah hasn't had anything living that he can communicate with, and we are so made that even if we are not gregarious creatures, we want to communicate with somebody or something.

It's amazing how we can get attached to a living thing. For many years, I was rough on owners of dogs. But I've learned to appreciate dog owners. I'm attached to a dog now, and I'm not saying anything ugly about dog owners anymore. My daughter brought the dog home one night—a big husky, the biggest dog I'd ever seen. I asked her when she came in with him, "Did you bring a saddle?" And I thought, *My, we can't keep this dog.* And then there came along a young fellow who married my daughter and took her all the way across the country. When she left, the dog stayed with me. Well, the dog misses her, and I miss her. The fact of the matter is, the dog and I sit on the patio, and do you know what? I *talk* to the dog! My wife came to the door the other day and said, "Who are you talking to out here?" I said, "I'm talking to the smartest dog in the world."

Jonah became attached to the gourd. I imagine he got a bucket that very day and went down to the Tigris River, filled the bucket with water, came back, and poured the water around the roots of the gourd and started to train the vine to grow up over his shelter that he'd made. And I think he talked to it. "*Oh, you're running the wrong way, little gourd.*" And, of course, Jonah had been running the wrong way too; he was still running the wrong way. Believe me, he got attached very quickly to the only living thing he could talk to. God had arranged all this purposely. Watch how He is going to move in on Jonah:

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." –Jonah 4:7, 8

We have had here in the book of Jonah a prepared fish, a prepared gourd, a prepared worm, and a prepared vehement east wind. Each of them is equally miraculous. The vehement east wind was just as miraculous as the fish was. You see, God is dealing with this man. Jonah has lost his gourd vine, the little living thing to which he had become attached. It's dead now, and he's grieving over it because it's the only living thing he had. You say such behavior is ridiculous! May I say to you, it's ridiculous the gourds that you and I get attached to in this world today. How many people have a "gourd" to which they are giving their time, giving their energy, giving their money, giving everything—and what is it really?

HEART TO HEART

Listen now to God as He speaks to Jonah:

Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" –Jonah 4:9

In other words, Jonah says, "This is it! I want to die. You didn't destroy Nineveh, but you did destroy my gourd!" He's a petulant little prophet, isn't he? He's like a lot of the critical saints today. They've got a gourd, and they don't want anybody to take the gourd away from them. How did the Lord respond?

But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night." –Jonah 4:10

God is showing this man how ridiculous it is. “*Jonah, a gourd is nothing.*” My friend, I hate to say this, but a pussycat is nothing, a little dog is nothing; but a human being has a soul that is either going to heaven or hell. God did not ask you to *love* the lost before you go to them. He said, “*I love the lost, and I want you to go to them.*” That is what He is saying to Jonah: “Jonah, I love the Ninevites.”

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock? –Jonah 4:11

Who does He mean by “one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left”? He means little children. God says, “You wouldn’t want Me to destroy that city, would you, Jonah? If you can fall in love with a gourd vine, can’t you at least fall in love with Ninevite children?”

Now, may I make this application? When I was teaching in a Bible institute, I used to say (like all the other teachers were saying) that if you are called to go as a missionary, you ought to love the people to whom you go. I disagree vehemently with that now, because how can you love people before you know them? I first applied that to myself. I have never accepted a call to a church because I loved the people; I didn’t know them to begin with. I went because I felt God had called me to go there and preach. But I also have never been in a church in which I didn’t become involved with the people. I have stood at their bedsides in hospitals, I’ve been at their gravesides when death came, I’ve been with them in the marriages that have taken place in their families, and I can truthfully say I have never yet left a church where there wasn’t a great company of people whom I loved—and I really mean I *loved* them in the Lord. But I did not love them when I first went there, because I did not know them.

God is saying to a great many people today, "I want you to go and take the Word of God to those who are lost." And they say, "But I don't love them." God says, "I never asked you to love them; I asked you to *go*." I cannot find anywhere that God ever asked Jonah to go because he loved the Ninevites. He said, "Jonah, I want you to go because *I* love Ninevites, *I* want to save them, and I want *you* to take the message to them."

I remember talking to a missionary who was home from Africa, and he was showing me a picture of some little boys in the orphans' home there. I could tell by the way he looked at the picture that he loved those little boys. I said to him, "When you first went to Africa, did you love the Africans?" He said, "No, I really wanted to go to my people in Greece, but at that time the door was closed, and I could not go. So I had to go to Africa." As he held that picture, I said to him, "But do you love those little fellows now?" Tears came to his eyes. "Yes," he said, "I love them now."

God says to you and me, "I love the lost. You take the Word to them, and when they are saved and you get acquainted with them, you will love them too."

Since Jonah wrote the book, I think it is reasonable to say that after this experience he left the dead gourd vine and went down to where the living were walking the streets of Nineveh, and I think he rejoiced with them that they had come to a saving knowledge of God.

My friend, what a message this is! Why don't you get involved in getting the Word of God out to people? Don't wait to be motivated by things that are emotional. Take the Word of God to them because God loves them, and if you'll do that, I guarantee you will learn to love them also.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The text on the screen is partially visible, showing titles like 'The Antidote to Anti-Semitism', 'Armageddon: What? Where? When?', 'Back to Bethel', and 'Balaam: A Prophet for Profit'. Each item has a 'Download' button below it.

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