



THE BIBLE:

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*Bringing God's Word to Life
for Today's Teens*

SPENCER C. DEMETROS

THEODOSIA



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JONAH: MAN OF GOD, OR ACID REFLUX?

(JONAH 1-4)



Every now and then, we all need to find a nice, quiet place where we can reflect on what we've been doing with our lives, where our lives are taking us, and what God wants from us. And if we don't take the initiative to find that space on our own, sometimes the Good Lord will find it for us. Just like he did for the prophet Jonah. Unfortunately for Jonah, that nice, quiet place was somewhere between the esophagus and large intestine of a hungry fish.

Our story begins when God commands Jonah to travel to Nineveh, a big city that had fallen into widespread sin and corruption. God wanted Jonah to tell the Ninevites that he was furious with their wicked behavior and was planning to turn their urban cesspool into the next Sodom and Gomorrah unless they shaped up *and fast*. However, traveling to Nineveh to bear bad news to these degenerates wasn't high on Jonah's bucket list, so he bought a one-way ticket for a boat ride to Tarshish, which was in the complete opposite direction of

Nineveh. You have to wonder, did Jonah seriously think God wouldn't notice?

On the way to Tarshish, Jonah's boat sailed into a fierce storm. To keep the boat afloat, the crew threw cargo overboard, but the seas kept raging, and the future looked bleak. The storm was so bad that the sailors began to suspect someone on board must have done something to really annoy God. After a thorough investigation, Jonah admitted he had angered God by refusing his assignment and sailing away to Tarshish.

Jonah said to them, "Take me up, and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will be calm for you; for I know that because of me this great storm is on you" (Jonah 1:12). The sailors didn't feel right about pitching Jonah overboard, so they tried their hardest to row to shore. But when the storm grew even more fierce, they abandoned their hero routine and tossed Jonah overboard like a bucket of smelly chum. They did, however, beg God to forgive them for what they were doing. Soon, the seas calmed and the mariners were safe, although still pretty freaked out by the whole experience.

But God had sent a giant fish just for this moment, and it gobbled up Jonah, giving him a distraction-free haven. Sitting inside the creature's belly, Jonah prayed for forgiveness for having defied God and also thanked the Lord for saving him from the raging seas. After three days and three nights, God "spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land" (Jonah 2:10).

Then God spoke to Jonah again. "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I give you" (Jonah 3:2). And this time, Jonah did just that. He traveled to Nineveh and put the fear of God in its people—literally. Jonah told the people of Nineveh that God was planning to overthrow them in

forty days for their wickedness. The people believed Jonah and repented. Even the king got scared and cried out to God for mercy, telling his people to stop their evil and violence. And God saw their reactions, and he offered his mercy, sparing the city of the destruction he had planned.

Jonah clearly was a gifted preacher, convincing a huge wicked city to repent. But his success didn't make him happy at all. Truth be told, Jonah wasn't particularly fond of the Ninevites. In fact, he hated them.

The people of Nineveh were Assyrians, rivals of the Jewish people who had treated them brutally in the past. Jonah would have been happier if the Ninevites had ignored his warning and continued their wicked ways because he wanted to watch God eradicate them from the face of the earth. Seeing that Jonah needed a bit of attitude adjustment, God decided to teach him another lesson.

Jonah had left Nineveh after he finished preaching and was now sitting outside of the city so he would have a front-row seat if God changed his mind and decided to destroy Nineveh after all. Jonah built himself a little hut, and the Lord offered up some comfort for Jonah, providing a lush green vine that grew up over the hut, completely protecting him from the blazing sun.

Jonah was extremely grateful for the vine. But the next day God sent a worm to eat away at the vine, leaving Jonah to sizzle in the hot sun like a french fry. He got so overheated, he fainted. When Jonah regained consciousness, he was so angry that he prayed to God to just let him die.

Of course, God was at the ready for this teaching moment. He told Jonah something like: "You have a lot of nerve carrying

on like the ultimate drama queen over the death of a silly plant. Especially when you wanted me to kill 120,000 Ninevites—actual human beings that were created by none other than yours truly—just because you have a bone to pick with them. You need to put in perspective, my friend, how you value human life. Or else you might find yourself in the belly of another fish. And, next time, you won't be so lucky to get puked out of its mouth. On the next go-around, you might just find yourself shooting out the other end as oceanic fertilizer.”

Presumably, Jonah got the point.

This story teaches us two important lessons. First, when God calls, you need to answer. That call could be to do something as simple as sharing your faith with a friend or volunteering for a church project or helping someone in need. Or the call could be to do something more demanding, like missionary work or entering the seminary. God does have a specific plan for each of us, and we will only experience true joy and meaning in our lives if we answer God's call. Of course, we have the right to decline. We also have the option to close the door on God altogether and pretend that he doesn't even exist. But you must realize that God holds us accountable for our actions—and also for our inaction. When we try to hide from the Lord and refuse his calling for our lives, we probably won't be swallowed up by a giant fish. But there will be consequences. At the very least, we'll feel the emptiness that comes from living a life separate from God.

The book of Jonah also provides a second lesson, although lots of people miss this one: God does not respond well when we wish harm or misfortune on other people—even our enemies. Jesus taught us that you must “love your enemies, bless

those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). As with the Ninevites, God loves every person that he created and, although he punishes those who do evil, he gives everyone an opportunity to repent and come home to him.

At one time or another, most of us fall into that dark place where we let our anger and resentment toward someone get the best of us. But when we conclude that other people are worthy of God’s punishment, we need to remind ourselves that we have only a tiny glimpse of their life and motives. Only God fully knows what is inside the hearts and minds of people who have hurt us. So, it’s not for us to judge who should receive God’s blessings and who deserves punishment. Our job is to remain obedient to the Lord and to love everyone, as he has commanded. If our enemies repent and receive God’s blessing, we should rejoice and be glad.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



- ◆ Have you ever tried to run away and hide from God like Jonah did? What prompted you to do that? Were you refusing to do what God wanted you to do? Or were you just angry with him?
- ◆ Jonah came back to God after he was swallowed by a giant fish. How has God brought you back to him? What other methods does he use to bring us back?
- ◆ Have you ever had a hard time letting go of anger or resentment of someone or a group of people? Did you wish that something bad would happen to that person? How can you overcome those feelings?

ALL THOSE DANCING LESSONS FINALLY PAID OFF!

(MATTHEW 14:1–12; MARK 6:12–29; LUKE 9:7–9)



Remember John the Baptist? Jesus' cousin who ate locusts and baptized Jesus? Well, let me introduce you to the characters involved with John's final days. You'll see, this crew could have come straight out of a trashy novel.

First, there's the rich and powerful King Herod, who ruled over Galilee and was the son of Herod the Great. Next, there was Herodias. She was both Herod's wife and his ex-sister-in-law. (Yep, you read that right—more about that later.) She wins the prize for the most wickedly evil character in our story, but she had some stiff competition. Then there's Herodias' daughter from her first marriage to Herod's brother. The Bible doesn't identify her by name, so we'll just call her Twinkle-Toes. (Keep reading and you'll find out why.)

John the Baptist was doing what he was put on earth to do: preach to the people and tell them to repent and stop sinning. He was a tough-minded, no-nonsense Baptist, so he had no qualms about throwing a bucket of cold water on people's good times

if necessary. And one of John's cold-water buckets had Herod's name written all over it.

You see, Herod had fallen for Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip. So Herod ditched his own wife and swept Herodias off her feet—and away from Philip. And John wasn't the kind of preacher who would keep his mouth shut in the face of such unabashed sleaze. He told Herod to knock off the funny business with Herodias and repent. So Herod did what any self-respecting, power-hungry despot would do: he threw John in jail. There, no one could hear John scream about Herod's sins. Now Herodias was even more upset than Herod about John's criticisms of their power-couple status. And she thought prison wasn't punishment enough for John. She wanted him dead. But Herod knew John was a righteous man, so he wanted to keep John safe, but silenced, in prison.

So that's where things stood when Herod threw a birthday bash for himself and invited all of his top public officials, military commanders, and other bigwigs. At the height of the party, after Herod likely had fallen head-first into the wine bottle (in other words, was pretty schnookered), Herodias sent in her daughter, Twinkle-Toes, to dance for the king. And did she ever dance! She shimmied, she pranced, she skipped and dipped and twirled like a whirling dervish on steroids. Twinkle-Toes shook her booty and cut the rug like nobody had ever seen before. At the end of her performance, she leapt across the dance floor like a gazelle in her final Grand Jeté, and the crowd erupted in cheers!

King Herod, in all of his alcohol-fueled exuberance, jumped to his feet, so overwhelmed by Twinkle-Toes' performance that he was ready to make a rash promise. "Ask me whatever you want,

and I will give it to you . . . Whatever you shall ask of me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:22–23).

Twinkle-Toes, recognizing this was the opportunity of a lifetime, wasn’t going to squander it by jumping into a hasty decision. So she ran to her mother for advice on what her big ask should be. Her mother didn’t hesitate: “The head of John the [Baptist],” she told her daughter (Mark 6:24).

No doubt, Twinkle-Toes responded something to the effect of: “Are you crazy? I can have anything in the whole wide world and you want me to ask for some guy’s bloody noggin on a platter? Everyone in this God-forsaken kingdom knows you’re a wicked she-devil in designer clothes. But this crosses the line even for you, old lady.”

And Herodias’ response? She assuredly wasn’t going to let Twinkle-Toes have the last word: “You listen to me, you overrated little diva. If you think I hatched this ingenious, albeit evil, plan just so you could score a quick pile of cash from your idiot stepfather, and possibly get a spot on the next season of Jerusalem’s Got Talent, you are sadly mistaken. Now do as I say or I’ll make sure that your next flying leap will be off the cliffs of Mount Sinai!”

Not wanting to be the next pile of purple and pink bedazzled roadkill at the bottom of a mountain, Twinkle-Toes dutifully complied. She sashayed back into the banquet room and told Herod, “I want you to give me right now the head of John the [Baptist] on a platter” (Mark 6:25).

Herod immediately knew he had been outsmarted. “Wow. I expected her to ask for her own royal palace, or maybe a handsome prince. But John’s head? My darling wife must have put her up to this.” Herod didn’t really want to slaughter John, but

he couldn't back out of the promise he had made in front of the entire party crowd. So he sent some guards to take care of it, and it wasn't long before they delivered John's head on a platter to Twinkle-Toes, who passed it on to her mother.

The death of John the Baptist reveals the immense power of evil in our world and how far some people will go to silence the voice of righteousness. John was a good man who simply couldn't sit by silently in the face of the morally bankrupt behavior of Herod and Herodias. When John told them that they were committing a grave sin against God, their spouses, and each other, it was like he was holding up a mirror, forcing them to see themselves and their actions in the clear light of day. And they couldn't bear that view. But instead of seeking God's forgiveness and changing their behavior, Herod threw John in jail and Herodias devised her horrific plan to kill God's messenger.

Unfortunately, the Herods and Herodias of the world have always existed and are still present in our world. These people are so steeped in sin and depravity that they go into attack mode when they are confronted by someone whose honorable behavior casts light on their own bad conduct. But thank God for the John-the-Baptists of the world. These fearless and tough-as-nails Christians won't back down from the bad guys and are ready to accept their earthly consequences, knowing their eternal safety is in God's hands.

The question for each of us: do we have that strength and courage to stand up and defend our Christian values—values like kindness, love, and morality—even when we might attract the wrath of ungodly wrongdoers? If we do, we can take comfort in knowing that the Lord will be fighting the good fight

with us and will ensure that we prevail in the end. We also will gain the respect of those around us and establish ourselves as a leader among our peers, a great feeling for sure. And, beyond the immediate rewards for standing firm in our beliefs, the spiritual rewards will be both unlimited and eternal.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



- ◆ John the Baptist had a very direct and confrontational style of preaching. Do you think there's a place for that style in today's world? Do you think it could be effective in some circumstances?
- ◆ Why do you think Herodias could not just ignore John the Baptist? Why did she resort to such extreme actions?
- ◆ Have you ever seen people today lash out at the righteous in an effort to silence them?
- ◆ What stops us from standing up and fighting against sin and evil in our lives and in our world?

AM I GOING CRAZY? OR IS THAT OUR TAX COLLECTOR PERCHED UP IN THAT TREE?

(LUKE 19:1–10)



Jesus was generating more and more buzz as he traveled around Judea. People were hearing about this guy from Galilee who was healing the sick, calming the seas, feeding thousands, and preaching about God's love and mercy. They would line the streets as he passed through their towns, just trying to get a glimpse of him. That is what happened one day when Jesus and his apostles made their way through the city of Jericho.

Now there was a man in town who desperately wanted to lay eyes on Jesus. His name was Zacchaeus, and he was the chief tax collector in this region. Like Zacchaeus, many tax collectors were Jewish, but were working for the Roman Empire. And that alone made them pretty unpopular. To make matters worse, they typically took more money than the Romans required and kept that money for themselves. Basically, these guys were traitors to their own people and also cheats, so the Jewish people couldn't stand them.

Zacchaeus was also short. By the time he heard that Jesus was coming to town, the streets were already packed. Even standing on his tippy toes, Zacchaeus was never going to get a glimpse of Jesus, and no one was going to let that little creep squeeze past them for a better view. So Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree along the road, giving him the height he needed to see it all.

When Jesus approached, he stopped next to the tree, looked up, and saw Zacchaeus peeking through the branches. Their interaction went something like this.

JESUS: Zacchaeus, is that you up there?

ZACCHAEUS: Nobody up here but us birds. Tweet, tweet!

JESUS: Zacchaeus, I can see you! What are you doing up there?

ZACCHAEUS: Oh, don't mind me. I'm just looking for a ripe pomegranate.

JESUS: That's a sycamore. There are no pomegranates up there.

ZACCHAEUS: Oh, did I say pomegranate? I meant to say fig.

JESUS: Were you trying to sneak a peek at me?

ZACCHAEUS: Maybe.

JESUS: Well, get down from there!

ZACCHAEUS: No. I don't want to.

JESUS: Look, I'd like you to come down and take me to your house for dinner. I'd like to spend some time with you.

ZACCHAEUS: With me? Do you know who I am?

JESUS: Yes, I know all about you.

ZACCHAEUS: Then you know that I'm not a good person. Don't you hear all these people booing and hissing right now? I've cheated a lot of people and done a lot of bad things in my life. So, please just leave me alone; go away and pretend that you never saw me.

JESUS: Zacchaeus, you are right about one thing: you have done a lot of bad things to a lot of people. But you're not a bad person. There is still hope for you. That's why I want to come to your house and have dinner with you. I want you and everyone else to know I have come to heal the damaged and brokenhearted people who need God's love the most, and you are among them. Now please, come down.

ZACCHAEUS: I can't.

JESUS: What's wrong now?

ZACCHAEUS: My sandal is wedged between these branches. I'm stuck!

After Jesus helped Zacchaeus get out of the tree, they went to his house and shared a nice meal. Zacchaeus was so grateful for the love and forgiveness Jesus showed to him that he promised to give half of everything he owned to the poor. He also vowed to pay back every person he had ever cheated, saying he would give them four times the amount that he had taken. During his ministry, Jesus showed that he had the power to heal physical illnesses and to resurrect those who had died a physical death. And his

interaction with Zacchaeus proved that Jesus also had the power to give renewed life to those who had died a spiritual death.

We don't know why Zacchaeus had been so motivated by wealth and power that he was willing to lie and cheat his own people. Maybe he was trying to compensate for some feelings of insecurity; perhaps he had been bullied all his life because he was so short. But Jesus showed Zacchaeus that he could live an honorable life according to God's plan and treat people fairly and with kindness. That way, Zacchaeus could earn the love and respect he so longed for.

We all have our insecurities. But God's love can renew and revive us today, giving us the power to act honorably and with mercy, just like it did for Zacchaeus.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



- ◆ Jesus' interactions with Zacchaeus highlight second chances and redemption. Why did Zacchaeus need a personal encounter with Jesus to change his heart and turn his life around?
- ◆ As the local tax collector, Zacchaeus' sins were very visible and public. Does that make his sins more deserving of punishment than people's private sins?
- ◆ What are other examples of "public" sins? What are examples of "private" sins? In what ways can private sins be more destructive than public ones?
- ◆ Do you think people often pursue money and power because they desperately desire the respect and admiration of others? What are other ways some people try to earn respect and admiration?
- ◆ Is being respected important to you? If so, how do you try to earn it?