

The Reluctant Prophet

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

C. S. Lewis wrote a tongue in cheek book entitled *Mere Christianity*. In it he lays out the bare minimum requirements of a Christian life. If you want to put the least possible effort into it but still be able to call yourself a Christian, here's how you do it. He wrote it in 1952, so Jonah could not have possibly read it, but he seems to have mastered the concept.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (1:1-2).

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord ... kind of. He arose. But instead of going to Nineveh, he boards a ship going the opposite direction. Chapter 1 continues with the Lord sending a violent storm that threatens to sink the ship. Everyone but Jonah prayed to their gods to stop the storm. He was busy sleeping. The sailors cast lots to determine whose fault it was that they were all going to die. It worked. Jonah was singled out.

Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing

from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you" (1:8-12)

The crew didn't want to sacrifice Jonah. They threw all of the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Then they tried to row back to shore. It didn't work. *So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows (1:15-16).*

The chapter ends with the most famous part of what happened. *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights (1:17).*

In the first verse of chapter 2 we read: *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish (2:1).* And the last verse says: *And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land (2:10).*

Jonah has figured out that as God's prophet he must, at least, go where he is supposed to go, so he heads to Nineveh. *Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into*

the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:3-4).

I see Jonah continuing to do as little as possible. It will take him three days to walk from one side of the city to the other preaching his sermon as he goes. He gives it one day.... And his sermon sets a world record for being the shortest ever. In the Hebrew it is 5 words: "Yet 40 days; Nineveh destroyed."

The crazy thing is, God's word works! *And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish" (3:5-9).*

Is Jonah happy about this? ... Not at all. In fact, he says, *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:3).*

At first we may have thought Jonah was a progressive prophet. "Those people of Nineveh should be able to do whatever they want. Who am I to tell them what they are doing is sinful?" Now we know that he wasn't trying to be tolerant. He wanted them to die in their sins.

But now that they have heard the word of the Lord, they are repenting. God is most likely not going to destroy them. And Jonah is greatly displeased. *And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster (4:2).*

Does our God continue to be *a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster?* Does the word of the Lord continue to work?

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15)