



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Jonah Who Is Every Person

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## **What He Learned About The Grace Of God, And About Himself**

My name is Jonah. While the experiences through which I have just gone may be unique to most, the decisions and struggles with which I was confronted certainly are not. Because of what happened, I am a sadder and wiser man today.

No, not sadder.

I really am a happier and wiser man. I have seen the light and the light has illumined my life.

It seems as if it were a lifetime ago that it all started, although actually, it was just a few months ago.

I am a prophet of Israel, and the son of a prophet. The word of the Lord came to me to go and preach in that great city, Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and I didn't want to go. Not under any circumstances.

Actually, I was afraid to go. Everybody knew just how wicked the people of Nineveh were. I had no message to preach except to tell them how terrible they were in the sight of God, and how angry He was with them. I knew they were doomed. I could neither offer nor promise any hope, and I didn't like the idea of preaching doom. They might react with violence. Besides, they were the enemy.

Those wicked Ninevites weren't going to listen to me. They would only make fun of me, or squash me like a bug on the pavement. They didn't care about my life. Surely God didn't expect me to go among those depraved people to try to tell them what they already knew. They were so ungodly that they couldn't care less that the God of Israel was displeased with them. "Who is this God you rant about anyway?" they would jeer at me. "What power does he have over us?" Going to Nineveh for any reason was at the bottom of my list of priorities.

But the word of the Lord to me was persistent and strong. "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it." (Jonah 1:2) It didn't look like I had much choice – not if I stayed where God was.

I did have a choice. I could flee from the presence of the Lord. It was a heady thought. I didn't really want to leave my home, but I would pay that price to get out of going to Nineveh. So I decided to go in the opposite direction. I didn't tell anyone what I was going to do. I just left. If no one knew, they couldn't come after me. That way I would be safe.

Or, so I thought.

I took passage on a ship to Tarshish – a long way from Nineveh in the opposite direction. And I waited – and waited – for the ship to sail. Those were days of sheer

misery. There was nothing I could do but stay out of sight and wait, and hope no one would recognize me.

When, finally, the ship put out to sea, I breathed a great sigh of relief. I was safe. I was away from the presence of the Lord. I could relax, enjoy the voyage and take up a new life in Tarshish. Nineveh would be far, far away. The city was going to be destroyed anyway. People couldn't fly in the face of the will of God and expect to get away with it. Why should I take any risk?

It wasn't until after the storm struck that I began to realize that God's punishment was just as sure for me as it was for the people of Nineveh. God causes things to happen. He exercises control. He intervenes. He punishes those who disobey him – whoever they are – and anyone else who happened to be in the way.

Or, at least, that is what I believed then.

Nonetheless, I felt so secure after the ship sailed that I went down into the hold of the ship to my bunk and promptly fell asleep. I was dead tired from all the stress and strain of the days of worry and waiting – so tired that I didn't even wake up when the ship threatened to break apart in the violence of the storm.

At first I didn't sense the agitation of the captain when he shook me awake. "We are about to be destroyed by the storm and you are sleeping!" he shouted. "If you have any faith, you'd better call upon your God. Maybe he will save us. "

Call upon my God! I had run away from the presence of my God.

The stark reality hit me. I could not run away from my God. And God was angry with me – so angry, that I was the cause of the storm that threatened to destroy the ship and all on board. I couldn't get away from God. I couldn't ignore His call and not pay the price. God demanded to be obeyed. God was not merciful to those who refused. No matter where I tried to go, I would never be away from the presence of the Lord.

The ship's crew shouldn't have to pay the price for my disobedience. It was too late for me, but not for them. Maybe I could redeem myself before the Lord a little if I confessed and took my punishment. Maybe God would take pity on me. The ship's crew didn't have to die because of me.

"I'm the cause of your trouble," I declared to the crew. "Throw me overboard and the storm will be over." I couldn't believe I said that, but somehow I knew it was the only way.

Though the crew was terrified by the violence of the storm, they couldn't quite bring themselves to throw me to my death. They continued to fight to save the ship – but to no avail. Although I wanted to relieve them of the decision by jumping overboard, I

couldn't force myself to do it. I hadn't wanted to go to Nineveh. Neither did I want to die for my disobedience. I couldn't take that step.

The storm raged more fiercely. Finally, in desperation, the crewmen picked me up and threw me into the sea.

The sea ceased from its raging.

How did I know? I don't know how I knew. Nor do I know how I knew what happened next – or if it really happened.

I didn't drown.

Whatever happened, I found myself on the coast near Joppa, from whence I had sailed some days before. How long before? I didn't know. I did know I shouldn't be alive. No one could survive in the sea in that storm. Only, by some miracle, I had.

What I remember happening was too preposterous to believe.

I was swallowed by a great fish and, against all logic, was alive in the belly of the fish. It was the Lord's doing. He didn't want me dead. He wanted me to go to Nineveh and preach. He really went to extremes to convince me.

Poor fish. After three days, it got sick of me and vomited me out on dry land.

Small wonder. I was sick of me, too. In my desperation, I was willing to say anything – do anything – to get out of my predicament.

From the belly of the fish, I cried to the Lord. I proclaimed His greatness. I acknowledged His power. I confessed my sin. I insisted I was loyal to Him. (How could I be, since I had tried to flee from His presence?) I promised to obey. When I think about it now, I am ashamed. But I found out how far a person will go to try to save himself. I saw myself in stark reality, and I didn't like what I saw.

You would think anyone who had been through what I had been through would have learned his lesson, but about all I had learned was that I couldn't run away from God. I still believed God to be demanding, and unforgiving, and punitive. What He wanted He was going to have, no matter what, or somebody was going to pay the price. He was in charge. There was no escaping that fact. But I no longer believed I could escape from God.

Therefore, when the word of the Lord came to me a second time, "Go to Nineveh and deliver my message to them," I went. I still didn't want to go. I still feared the reaction of the people. I still didn't see any reason for me to preach to them nor warn them. They were already doomed. They couldn't stop God from destroying them – not the God in whom I believed. His vengeance was sure.

Nineveh was an awesome city – bigger than any city I had ever seen. It took three days to walk from one city limit to the other – and I was supposed to bring God's message to all those people. All I could see to do was preach wherever I could get a hearing. Over and over I cried my warning. "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4)

I was astonished at the response. The people of Nineveh seemed to hear me and to believe God would do what He said.

Great crowds gathered to listen to me preach. I spelled out their sins, and no person escaped my castigations. Their way of life was an abomination to the Lord, and I told them off in no uncertain terms. They hung on my every word, their faces creased with anguish and fear. Instead of jeers and taunts they begged to hear more, and then gathered in small groups to talk about what I had said. Their tension was like a presence around them. Sounds of weeping and sobbing filled the air. Some began to pray aloud, pleading with God for mercy and forgiveness.

Soon multitudes of people were shouting and crying their confessions. A fast day was proclaimed. From the greatest to the least, they put on sack cloth and sat in ashes. I had never experienced such reactions. Even the King covered himself with sack cloth and sat in ashes, and ended up issuing a proclamation to be published in all of Nineveh for all living creatures – even the animals – to join in the acts of contrition.

"Who knows," he said. "God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger and not destroy us." (Jonah 3:9)

I knew better, of course.

God was displeased with the people of Nineveh. They would have to pay the price for their grievous sins. Being sorry, repenting, begging for forgiveness wouldn't make any difference. They had to be punished for what they had already done. God wouldn't change His mind – not the God in whom I believed.

I was wrong. God didn't destroy the people of Nineveh.

I was furious – so much so that I completely lost sight of the effectiveness of my preaching – and of God's work, for that matter. In my anger I pointed some things out to God.

"I should have known you would forgive the people of Nineveh if they turned from their evil ways, but I didn't want to face that reality. The people ought to be destroyed because of the evil they have done, but you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and you love them even when they have done terrible, sinful things. But you ought not to let them go unpunished. It's not right. I am angry enough to die.

"Do you do well to be angry?" That was all the Lord said to me.

I wouldn't face my anger. I couldn't believe God would not destroy the city, as He had said. He hadn't told me to preach anything about repentance. I would face God with my anger until He did what He had said He would do. So I took up a vantage point near the edge of the city, built a booth to shade me, and watched to see just what God would do. I was pretty grim, and if the truth be known, I pouted a little.

By noon time, I was pretty miserable. I was hot from my anger, and hotter from the sun beating down on me.

Then God did something that I didn't understand, but for which I was exceedingly grateful. He caused a plant to grow up over me that shaded and cooled me all the long day. All of a sudden the plant was there. It could only be God's doing.

Why should He do that? We weren't on good terms. I was still holding Him to account for not doing as He had said.

When morning came, I thought I had the answer, for the plant had withered away as quickly as it had grown up. God was showing me His displeasure, and He left me there to suffer through another scorching, sultry day, with no plant to shade and cool me.

Oh, I could relieve my suffering by giving up my vigil, but I was determined not to. God hadn't kept His word, nor treated me fairly. I was still angry enough to die. So, when He asked me, "Do you feel justified in your anger about the plant?", I replied with some venom, "I am justified. You could at least have left the plant for me. You forgave the Ninevites, and you made me suffer. They did much evil. All I did was to be angry with you for not punishing them as you had said you would. And now I'm angry about the plant."

God's response astonished me.

"You are concerned about the plant," He said, "and you really had nothing to do with it – except to benefit from its shade for a while. You didn't make it grow. You didn't take care of it. You had no investment in it. Yet you are angry that it is destroyed, and you consider that anger justified.

"I did create the people of Nineveh. I did care for them. I did – I do – have an investment in them. Is there not good reason for me to have concern for them?" God spoke no other words to me.

For a while, I couldn't understand what God had said. I was in the dark.

And then the light broke through. There was no reason for God to destroy the people of Nineveh.

True, they had done much evil. They had disregarded and denied God. But He was concerned for them. He knew that, if they continued in their evil ways, the

inevitable result would be that they destroyed themselves and each other. They were His creation. He loved them. He was not interested in vengeance nor punishment. Instead, he wanted them to repent of their evil ways and turn to the fuller life His way would give them.

How wrong I had been! God did not intend for me to go to Nineveh and threaten them with His destruction. He intended for me to help them see the inevitable result of their kind of life. Perhaps they would see how wrong it was and choose the better way.

Despite the fact that I thought I was proclaiming the certainty of God's wrath and vengeance, they heard God's love and concern. The message reached them. They turned from their evil ways. But I was so sure God would reject and destroy His people if they stepped out of line, that I was angry when it didn't happen. I would have made them pay for their sinning.

Then I realized that this whole experience of going to Nineveh was for my benefit. Oh, the people heard God's message and repented, but the real point was that I finally heard God's message. I saw my own sin and repented. My belief that God was an angry, vengeful, punitive God was all wrong. It took the kind of traumatic experiences through which I had been to enable the message to get through to me. I wouldn't have believed that I was that far off target, nor that it would be so difficult for God to get His message through to me.

But I was and it was.

I now know that God is a God of love and that I, a child of God, can love as God loves.

That's why I am a happier and wiser man today. I have seen the light and the light has illumined my life.