

# **Tarshish? Or Nineveh?**

MJCF

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Jonah 1:1-17, John 12:20-26

Author Eugene Peterson tells a story of his pastor, who frequently preached against drinking alcohol. The pastor was proud that he had not touched a drop of alcohol, believing that drinking is wrong. Well, one day, the pastor was at a wedding where someone had spiked the punch (secretly added alcohol to the mix). Everyone seemed to know about it except the pastor, who kept going back for more, saying to the host, "I've got to get the recipe for this punch!" By the end of the time, he was smashed (drunk)... The pastor had not been very discerning. Somehow, he hadn't noticed that there was something strange going on with that punch.

I could identify with that story. No, I haven't had the same experience, although I have made a decision to (generally) stay away from drinking alcohol. The area where I could identify with this story is in the fact that I have often been in situations where I failed to notice something important, since I was focusing too much on myself. I can completely identify with the feeling of being the "righteous one," because, like that pastor, I often work hard to always do the right thing. Except, putting so much energy into being self-righteous, I often become blind to the needs of others. It's easy then, to miss God's leading.

Initially, Jonah completely missed God's leading, as he focused on what was comfortable for himself. In fact, when God called him to go to Nineveh, he ran away in the opposite direction, to Tarshish. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the foreign country, enemy to the Israelites. Eventually, in a war Assyria would conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So, we know they were strong enemies. Jonah had every reason to want to avoid Nineveh. The Ninevites had a reputation of being cruel. Why bring God's message to them? But, God was concerned not just for the Israelites, his "chosen people." God cared for the outsiders, the people of Nineveh, as well. But with Jonah, the prosperous city of Tarshish could represent excitement and fun. In heading to Tarshish, Jonah was choosing his own pleasure over the challenge of heading to Nineveh with a difficult task.

God does not let Jonah get to Tarshish. God sends a storm in order to help Jonah get back on track. When Jonah is thrown overboard, the sea goes calm. If we continue to read, we see how Jonah survives three days inside a big fish, how he turns back to follow God's call to Nineveh, and how his preaching of God's warning causes the Ninevites to repent, and the city is saved. This story contains many more details and emphasises themes of God's forgiveness, and care for all people, including stubborn, self-centred prophets. In Jonah, we see someone who is imperfect, just like us. We also see how God works through people, and how God's purposes still work out in spite of our weaknesses and self-centred temptations.

In our lives, God often allows us to experience storms, times of difficulty, times when we notice we are out of control. Sometimes, like Jonah, we experience a storm because we've made an unhealthy choice, or we've chosen our own comfort over following God's leading. In this case, God's allowing of the storm shows us God's grace. God doesn't let us continue in the wrong way for long without allowing negative consequences. These difficulties force us to re-evaluate and change our direction.

Personally, I remember the storm that happened in our church with the tensions happening between pastor Park and me. As I think back, I remember spending a lot of energy thinking about the ways in which pastor Park had misunderstood me, and trying to figure out how to explain, and "correct" his understanding of things. But, it would have been good for me to spend more energy on trying to understand him, rather than trying to help him understand me. Like Jonah, I was more focused on myself than on following God's call to all of us to love our neighbours. It's only afterward that I started to see that my care for pastor Park had been lacking. If I had put more energy into asking him more questions, and caring for him, we may have still decided to go separate ways, but the process may have gone on with much less tension. I really believe that pastor Park was doing his best to be faithful, and to care for the church. And for me, as I look back, it's easy to think, "I did my best." But, that's

no excuse. It doesn't mean I have no sin and I'm blameless. I can still feel sorry that my focus was too self-centred. I feel sad that the tension between us also caused tension for others in the church. Since that time, I'm noticing that in many of my interactions with various people, I've often had a tendency to focus too much on myself. I pray that the moments where I let go of personal defences and focus greater energy on others might increase in my life.

Too often I head to the "Tarshish" of defending myself or seeking my own comfort, rather than accepting God's challenges, heading to the "Nineveh" of reaching out to others around me. It takes a lot of energy to ask questions and "get into" people's lives, especially those who may not agree with me, or people who challenge me in some way. To stay quiet, is a way to protect myself from vulnerability, but I know that is not always the best way to care for others.

What about you? What is your "Tarshish," that time when you get stuck focusing only on your self? What is your "Nineveh," that difficult place where God may be challenging you to go, or that area where you need to care more? We're all called to let go of our self-centred ways in order to find true life in following Jesus. It's a process that continues throughout our lives.

I'd like to move now to the passage from the book of John that was read today, where the focus is on dying to ourselves. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the door is opened up to both Jews and non-Jews to be a part of God's family. We are encouraged to put our faith in Jesus Christ. In the passage we read about "some Greeks" who wish to see Jesus. For John, "to see" means "to believe." This is a story representing the message of Jesus going beyond just the Israelite community to include the non-Israelites who become believers. When Philip and Andrew tell Jesus about the Greeks who would like to see him, Jesus answers, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." For the first 11 chapters of the book of John, Jesus has repeatedly said, "My hour [or time] has not yet come..." But here, Jesus says it now has come, meaning he would very soon be facing the cross. After his death and resurrection, he would be glorified at Lord of all. All people would be drawn to him, both Jews, and non-Jews. He continues with "Very truly, I tell you." This emphasises the importance of what he says next: "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

Jesus is using extreme language to emphasise that if we want to follow him, we need to make him the priority above all else, even our very lives. It's an invitation to all who would like to follow. But, in dying to ourselves, like seeds buried in the ground, we can then by the power of God, grow more fully live for Christ, and bear fruit. When we try to follow God with our own energy, we easily fall into following our ideas about God. Many people become devoted to following the cause that Jesus started. Maybe they are working hard to help in a homeless shelter, or maybe they are working hard to teach people what the Bible says. These are great things, but they are not as important as being devoted to Jesus, himself! Do you see the difference? We easily work hard to do church work, or good things, because Jesus teaches us to love and care for one another, but it's possible to get busy with the work and start to leave Jesus out of it! We need to constantly return to Jesus in prayer, seek God's will in our discussions with other believers, and look for the message of God's Spirit as we read the Bible. Jesus died on the cross, and rose again. He didn't follow a self-centred way like going to "Tarshish". Instead, he followed God's way of sacrificial love, the more challenging way like going to "Nineveh." He didn't serve himself, but was obedient to God's ways, even when it meant sacrificing his life. The fruit of this action is that all people are now drawn to God through him. We are all part of God's family.

If we are devoted to Jesus Christ, our work may seem insignificant. It may sometimes feel like not much is happening. But, just like a planted seed seems dead for a while, eventually God can produce fruit, and a harvest beyond our imagination. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you for your grace and your mercy. Forgive us for those times that we've run in the opposite direction rather than follow your calling. Forgive us for times that we've looked for our own comfort and forgotten to care for others. Thank-you that you do not give up on us. We pray that you'd open our eyes that we may recognize those times we need to make changes. O Lord, we live in uncertain times. With the pandemic, climate change, wildfires all around, loved ones with health challenges, and tensions rising we pray for your peace. As a church may we seek to be faithful to you. Through Christ we pray, Amen.