When the belly of a whale sounds good

Jonah wants God to hate his enemy as much as he does.

By Michelle Henrichs

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The Jehovah's Witnesses visit me monthly. Last month they brought me a flyer for one of their gatherings and showed me a trailer for their movie *The Story of Jonah: A Lesson in Courage and Mercy.* It looks pretty exciting. The woman suggested that Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because the Ninevites were so violent.

Maybe. But it's not his fear of their violence that sends him to Tarshish and eventually into the belly of a big fish. It's Jonah's hate.

Jonah chooses his hate for the Ninevites over his love for God—even to the point of death. The Bible talks about being faithful even to death, but Jonah is *un*faithful to the point of death. He's sort of a reverse martyr. Sure, he finally goes to Nineveh when the whale vomits him up on shore, but he doesn't do it with a grateful and joyful heart. He certainly doesn't hope for God's miracle of redemption.

Regardless how begrudging his word of accountability was to the Ninevites, they respond. God has mercy on this pagan people who, in a moment of spiritual clarity, comprehend the gravity of their sin and the sovereignty of the One True God. And Jonah is angry.

Even after he sees their acts of repentance, Jonah still holds out hope that God will hate his enemy as much as he does. In the part of the story that many of us don't know (though it shows up in VeggieTales), we witness the extent of Jonah's hate and anger. Jonah camps out in a spot overlooking the city hoping for God to rain down fire and brimstone. But God doesn't do this. And Jonah is angry.

Jonah's hate for the Ninevites exceeds his love for God. And this hate finally extends itself to anger with God. Jonah is angry that God is compassionate and merciful to these underserving people whom Jonah doesn't like. And this isn't just a difference of opinion—Jonah is angry about something at the core of God's character.

I love the story of Jonah. Not so much because of the big fish but because of the humanity of this prophet and the story of God's mercy. Jesus said we are to love our enemies because God does (Matt. 5:43–48). But many of us would sell all our possessions and give our money to the poor before we would truly pray God's redemptive mercy and love for those we hate.

This has hit home for me in the last year. I am heartsick and ashamed and angry and even fearful about the current state of our country. I'll be honest (and you might stop reading here): I harbor hate in my heart for the president. I don't wish violence upon him. But the policies that continue to endanger the most vulnerable and isolate the already-marginalized make me physically ill. I don't think he's a good person. I believe my children are less safe today than they were 18 months ago. I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I'm simply sharing my struggle because I don't think I've ever hated anyone before.

The president isn’t my enemy or a Ninevite. But sometimes the belly of a whale sounds good compared to sitting at the banquet table of God and sharing the bread of life and cup of salvation with someone I feel is doing evil upon people and doesn’t seem to care.

Thinking about Jonah has challenged me to examine myself and what I am willing to be faithful to even to the point of death. I am confronted again by God’s faithfulness and God’s sovereignty, and how I love these truths about God when they are in my favor. But God doesn’t play favorites.

And so, as I sit overlooking Nineveh, I’m not angry with God for God’s generous and outrageous offer of mercy. Because I know I, too, am in need of it. Instead I will continue to wrestle with my hate the same way Jacob wrestled with that angel on the way back to the Promised Land. And pray that I will be healed of my hate so that I can truly pray for God’s mercy.

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