

“Biblical Characters of the Bell Curve: Laggards (Jonah)”

Jonah 1:1-3 ¹

Forty-four years ago this summer I had just completed my sophomore year at Georgetown College in Kentucky. I'd been active in church during my freshman year, as I'd always been growing up, and at the end of that year my home church in Atlanta had licensed me to ministry upon my testimony that God had called me to vocational Christian work. During my sophomore year, though, I'd begun running away from God.

I'd decided to major in psychology, which is a worthwhile endeavor to which I've given much of the rest of my life, but in true sophomoric fashion I'd begun to take some wrong turns that novices in psychological studies often take. I hadn't been an outright pagan during my sophomore year, but I had pretty much stopped going to church while I was away at school.

God was still at work, of course, as God always is, and the Spirit's stirrings caused me to apply for BSU summer missions even though I wasn't active in the Baptist Student Union. My fellow students, aware of my lack of participation, declined to recommend me for BSU appointment, not seeing appropriate spiritual fruit in my life. But the Home Mission Board, as we called it then, didn't have the advantage of knowing me personally, and because I looked okay “on paper,” they sent me to northern California to serve during the summer of 1970.

I spent about half the summer working at Cazadero Baptist Camp, situated alongside Austin Creek, a couple of hours north of San Francisco. One afternoon after work in the kitchen was ended, I went to sit on a stump by the creek, pondering my avoidance of God's purposes in my life. I don't know whether anyone else would have heard anything or not, but seemingly out of nowhere I heard a Voice speak very clearly, “*It's hard for you to kick against the pricks, isn't it?*”—the King James rendering of Saul's encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:5).

I was so shocked and startled that I nearly fell off the stump into the creek! I had run several thousand miles “away from God,” only to find myself “*at the very gateway to heaven*” (Genesis 28:17). That experience didn't end my running away from God, but it did become the turning point, after which I began to make my way back by stages from the far country of the spirit. Keep this story in the back of your mind as we move into our study for this morning.

This morning we begin a four-part series on what I'm calling “Biblical Characters of the Bell Curve,” an idea I got from Gordon MacDonald.² As you probably know, a “bell curve,” also known as a “normal distribution,” is how many human characteristics appear in large populations. In a normal distribution, 68% of the population is located within what's known as one “standard deviation” from the mean or average of the group.³ Ninety-five percent of the population is located within two standard deviations of the mean, and 5% of the population is located between two and three standard deviations from the mean (in both directions).

For our purposes in these sermons, all you need to understand is that a few people are “way ahead of the pack” in terms of their partnership with God's purposes in the world. Most people are either slightly ahead of the pack or slightly behind the pack in their partnership with God's purposes; and a few people are way behind the pack in terms of their partnership with God's purposes. Those who are way ahead of the pack we're going to call “**pioneers.**” Those slightly ahead or slightly behind the pack we're going to call “**early adopters**” and “**late adopters.**”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on August 31, 2014.

² Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church? What to do when the church you love tries to enter the 21st Century* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 193.

³ The standard deviation of a random variable, statistical population, data set, or probability distribution is the square root of its variance.

And those who are way behind the pack we're going to call "**laggards.**" We're going to consider these in order, beginning with "laggards" today.

For this series, I'm going to talk about four male characters in the Bible, but we could just as easily talk about four female characters, as the graphic on the screen suggests. I've decided to save the women for a future series on "The Women of the Bible," so stay tuned for that at some point in the future.

The story I've just told you about myself is an example of a fairly common laggard dynamic, which is to run in the opposite direction from what we sense to be God's purpose in our lives. Although there are a number of biblical candidates for the laggard spot, the "poster child" for such an approach surely has to be Jonah.

The background of the book of Jonah has to do with the powerful and cruel Assyrian Empire, whose descendants are attempting to establish another powerful and cruel empire in that same land at this very moment. The capital of Assyria was the city of Nineveh, which first appears in scripture not long after the Flood (Genesis 10:11). The ruins of Nineveh are located in present-day Mosul, Iraq.

By the time of Jonah, Nineveh had become a truly magnificent city, covering 1,800 acres and surrounded by a high wall seven and one-half miles long, through which fifteen magnificent gateways controlled access to the city. A system of eighteen canals and aqueducts brought water to the city from as far as forty miles away.

The king's palace, billed as "the palace without rival," was 1,650 feet long and 794 feet wide. The palace was built on a foundation of 160 *million* bricks, had its own walls sixty-six feet high, and had more than eighty rooms. Some of the main doorways to the palace were flanked by colossal stone figures of winged lions and bulls weighing up to thirty tons each.

It seems to be universally the case with us humans that wealth and power eventually lead to wickedness and decay; and Assyria was no exception to this rule. Nineveh had long been a cruel and wicked city when the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai in the northern kingdom of Israel: "*Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh! Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are*" (Jonah 1:2, NLT).⁴

Now Jonah had grown up hating the Assyrians,⁵ and he didn't want the Assyrians to repent. He wanted them to be destroyed . . . "*so he got up and went in the opposite direction in order to get away from the LORD*" (Jonah 1:3).⁶

Unfortunately for Jonah, running away from God didn't work any better for him than it did for me, and God used a great storm and a great fish—the best-known character in the story—to convince Jonah that it would be wise to fulfill the assignment God had given. When Jonah finally walked the five hundred miles to Nineveh and proclaimed his eight-word message—"Forty days from

⁴ Jonah is different from the other prophetic books in that it focuses on the prophet's own story rather than his message. The book has eight scenes: (1) God's call; (2) Jonah runs; (3) the Fish; (4) Jonah repents; (5) Jonah's message; (6) Nineveh's response; (7) Jonah's anger; (8) God's compassion.

⁵ Although Jonah didn't know it, Assyria would destroy his homeland fifty years later, in 722 B.C., after which Israel's ten northern tribes would never be heard from again.

⁶ Now while it's not the point of this message, it's significant to note in passing that Jesus treated Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish as well as the account of Nineveh's repentance as historical facts. You can read His comments in Matthew 12:39-41.

now Nineveh will be destroyed!” (3:4)—the Bible tells us that the king repented in sackcloth and ashes, and the entire city repented with him, averting God’s judgment—as Jonah had feared that it would (cp. Jeremiah 18:7-8).⁷

As is usually the case, though, once the crisis appeared to be over, Nineveh returned to its habitual wickedness. A hundred years passed, and the prophet Nahum announced that because Nineveh and Assyria continued in their persistent evil, God’s judgment was about to fall on Assyria and its far-flung empire (Nahum 3:8-10). Nineveh was overthrown in 612 B. C. and it was reduced to little more than piles of rubble and sand, as it largely remains today.

So what’s the point? I actually want to make five brief points that relate to Jonah’s story. The first point, made by Jonah and Nahum together, is that **God really is serious about holy living, and nations that “thumb their noses” at God and at God’s commands will face inescapable judgment** . . . in God’s own time.

The same God who controls the movement of tiny atoms and the far reaches of the universe also controls the rise and fall of empires on this tiny blue dot in space. Nations that seem invincible today—including these United States—will become no more than dust on the pages of history if they fail to honor their Creator. And the historical record is that God takes a very dim view of those who deprive the poor to support the luxury of the rich. We do well to remember that.

The second point is that the book of Jonah makes plain the fact that **God’s love, forgiveness, and redemption are intended for all people, not just a “chosen few who are a lot like us.”** God made this clear to Abraham “way back in the beginning” (Genesis 22:18), and this is the main point of the book of Jonah. As God said to Jonah at the end, “*Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?*” (Jonah 4:11).⁸

The third point is that **there are many ways to run away from God** (Genesis 28:10). I ran to California. Moses ran to Sinai. Jacob ran to Haran. Jonah ran to sea. But do you know what? You can never run far enough or fast enough or long enough to get away from God (cp. Psalm 139:7-12).

Our running away from God doesn’t have to involve great distances. It’s possible to be in the far country of the spirit whether we’re near or far from home. Sometimes we run off to college, to the military, or even into mission work, as I did, but we’re still running away from God. Sometimes we run to work, or busyness, or sports, or drugs, or alcohol, or sex, but in the end,

⁷ This king may have been Shalmaneser IV, who reigned from 783-773 B.C. It’s noteworthy that while the chosen nation of Israel had refused to repent after years and years of God’s warning through the prophets, wicked Nineveh only needed to hear the warning once.

There are at least three possible contributing factors to this most unusual repentance. In the first place, during this time period, Assyria was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the mountain tribes of Urartu and its associates of Mannai and Madai in the north, who had been able to push their frontier to within less than 100 miles of Nineveh. The crisis was much like that being experienced in Baghdad with the approach of ISIL at this very moment (H.L. Ellison, “Introduction to Jonah,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, “Daniel and the Minor Prophets,” electronic version). Second, there was an eclipse of the sun visible in Nineveh during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771-754 BC), which aroused fear in the people (*English Standard Version Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008, p. 1683). Third, Jonah was not sent to preach monotheism, the knowledge of the God of Israel, or even a higher ethic to the people of Nineveh, and thus Jonah’s message did not require any real change in their religion (Ellison, loc. cit.).

⁸ The Mosque of the Prophet Yunis (Jonah) stands on one of the two most prominent ruin mounds in present-day Nineveh. www.islamiclandmarks.com/palestine/other/mosque_of_yunus_as.html

we always discover what Moses and Jacob and Jonah—and I—discovered, that running away doesn't work.

The reason running away doesn't work is that **God is always near us, whether we perceive God's Presence or not** (Genesis 28:16; Psalm 139:7-12). Discovering that God is present with us while we're running away as fast as we can is quite a surprise, as it was to Moses, to Jacob, to Jonah, and to me. We've run so far and so fast and so long that we think we've shaken God off our trail . . . and then the Voice speaks: "*It's hard for you to kick against the pricks, isn't it?*"⁹

My fifth point is the most important, and it's the one I hope you'll remember: **Just as God challenged Jonah to have compassion on his enemies and to pray for their well-being, so God challenges us to do these very same things.** Here's a story that makes the point uncomfortably well:

In April, 1994, just twenty years ago, Marc Sahabo murdered fifteen people during the Rwandan genocide. Six of these people were Felicita Mukabakunda's father, her uncle, and four other members of her family.

In all, Felicita lost twenty-nine members of her family in that ghastly, grisly mini-Holocaust that took nearly a million lives. Marc Sahabo spent seven years in prison, but because of prison overcrowding and his confession to his crimes, he was released in 2003.

Theo Mushinzimana directs a program of reconciliation in Rwanda about which he says, "Any reconciliation in Rwanda is a result of a biblical process that brings perpetrators and victims together at the foot of the Cross. When you have a Hutu who has been transformed by the Holy Spirit to repent and be forgiven, his story can be used in powerful ways to help other victims forgive.

"A repentant perpetrator also helps other perpetrators to heal, showing them it's possible to move beyond what they have done and be forgiven. And when you have a Tutsi who has forgiven, this is huge. It's a process that requires great [spiritual] truth—[spiritual] truth that only God's Word can make possible."¹⁰

After his release from prison, Marc Sahabo was invited to attend a reconciliation workshop led by Felicita's brother. At first, Marc thought it was a trap, and that Tutsis would be waiting to kill him. But he attended the workshop anyway, saying, "My heart was changed by Jesus. I wanted to ask the victims for forgiveness, to tell them I was no longer the killer they used to know."

Felicita's brother was able to forgive Marc, but Felicita wasn't ready to forgive. But with her brother's continued encouragement, she eventually decided that the time had come.

When they finally met face to face, Marc got down on his knees in front of Felicita, folded his hands, confessed his crimes, and begged for mercy. Felicita put her hand on his shoulder, looked him in the eyes, and said simply, "**I . . . forgive . . . you.**"

Marc says that at that moment, he felt like he "just came out of a shower, a clean man, except it was like a holy shower, because I felt clean on the inside." For Felicita, a heavy burden

⁹ See also Francis Thompson's poem, *The Hound of Heaven*.
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Hound_of_Heaven

¹⁰ Mark Moring, "Reconcilable Differences: Fifteen years after genocide, Rwanda is showing signs of healing," *Christianity Today*, June 2009, 28-32. The story/dialogue that follows is also from this article.

lifted, and the migraine headaches and nightmares she had suffered for ten years immediately disappeared and have not returned.

Today, Marc and Felicita say they are best friends. Their children play together, and their families regularly share meals. The two of them ride a bike from village to village, telling their story.

“I’m not scared of him anymore,” says Felicita. “Without Jesus, I’d go back to hating Marc. But because of Jesus, I have forgiven Marc, and I love him now.”

The point I want us all to remember this morning is that **sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal the awesome, amazing, transforming power of the Cross.** How powerful are the blood of Jesus and the love of God, after all? Can God’s love heal hatred between Hutus and Tutsis? Can it make a Jew love a Ninevite? *Can it make you reconciled to . . . well, you know who?*¹¹

My friend, as you sit here this morning, is there any way in which you are running away from what you know God wants you to do, as Jonah did? Or, on the other hand, do you think you have been disqualified forever from serving God because of what you’ve done? Whichever may be true for you, I’m very glad to be able to tell you that today is the day to come Home. . . .

Come, ev’ry soul by sin oppressed, there’s mercy with the Lord,
And He will surely give you rest by trusting in His word.

For Jesus shed His precious blood rich blessings to bestow;
Plunge now into the crimson flood that washes white as snow.

Yes, Jesus is the Truth, the Way that leads you into rest;
Believe in Him without delay and you are fully blest.

Only trust Him, only trust Him, only trust Him now;
He will save you, He will save you, He will save you now.¹²

¹¹ Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Multnomah, 2001), p. 47.

¹² John H. Stockton, “Only Trust Him”