



## So What's the Difference?

Psalm 62:5-12; Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20; 1 Cor 7:29-31

What's the difference in being God's change, and avoiding it?

It had been a wild ride. He had tried to escape, but escaping God has always been a hopelessly futile proposition. When God called him to Nineveh, Jonah fled in the opposite direction. As fast as his legs could carry him, he took off, flying down to the port to find a boat. It didn't matter so much where it was headed, just so long as it took him further away from Nineveh!

In the marketplace and along the pier, Jonah searched until he found a ship sailing opposite from God's directions. They were a rough lot working the ships, but better to cast his lot with them than to accept what God wanted of him. After all, the sailors were just merchants looking to make some money. Nineveh was a hated enemy territory. Its people were widely known for cruelty against outsiders. The stories of violence against their enemies would make the sailors—so ready to face the terrors of the deep—cringe in fear.

Jonah knew he could not hide from *Yahweh*. Any prophet worth his salt knew that. Even so, he figured he could at least give God a run for his money. The sea was considered an enemy of God's created order. Perhaps he could slip far enough away into this enemy territory that *Yahweh* would leave him alone. If God saw how far away Jonah had gone from the intended task, maybe God would give up the chase and leave Jonah in peace. This mission to Nineveh was just too much to accept. It called for too great an adjustment in Jonah's life. Anything would be better than what *Yahweh* was asking!

He had grown up with the Ninevites as enemies of his people. They were cruel, sadistic, and vindictive. Their brand of violence sent shivers of terror in the hearts of the surrounding nations. No one wanted to cross them, except with a sword. Come on, who would want to go and ask them to repent and turn to God for forgiveness? Now, had God wanted Jonah to lead an army to against them, wipe them out, and treat them the way they treated their own captives, that was something he might could handle. That was the expected, tried, and true way of dealing with enemies. This forgiveness, mercy, and grace nonsense was too much change for his comfort. "No thanks! No way! I'm out o' here!"

The ship was not too big, but maybe it was smelly enough to get him away from Nineveh. Perhaps the odors would be enough to keep God from getting too close! (After all, God liked fragrant offerings, and this was nothing of the kind!) Jonah embarked and hunkered deep down in the cargo hold of the ship. Safe at last! This was a change from his normal quarters, but at least he found comfort in hanging on to his righteous anger against his enemies, his pride at being superior to them, and subverting *Yahweh's* plan to treat Nineveh to grace and mercy. If he perished on the sea, maybe he could take his enemies with him. After all, no one else would take up the call to be *Yahweh's* messenger of grace to such a despised and hated nation! Exhausted from avoiding dealing with God, Jonah fell asleep.

The storm began as do all storms. The winds picked up and tossed the waves higher and higher against the boat. The sailors lashed down all they could lash, lowered the sails to keep them intact, and did all they knew to protect their ship and their lives. Water flooded over the bow. They bailed and desperately began discharging their goods to raise their buoyancy. It was a losing battle. The storm was too fierce and they recognized this as more than just another storm. This one had a divine purpose and

ferocity. Jonah was singled out. Glad to become the hero of his nation, he told them to toss him overboard. He might die in the sea, but Nineveh would never hear the warning to repent and be spared!

*Yahweh* was still working on change—changing Jonah’s life, attitude, and course. Jonah had tried to change his course away from Nineveh, but God got him there, anyway. God took the very sea, considered an enemy of *Yahweh*’s creation, and turned it to his will. The feared monsters of the deep took Jonah along the path of God’s transformation, and the storm abated. Coughed up out of the waters, Jonah made his way to Nineveh. God still had not changed Jonah’s attitude. God had not altered his will. Jonah resigned himself to obey, however, considering he had little choice in the matter. That did not mean he had to be happy about it!

As what was left of his clothing dried, the smell lessened somewhat as he walked to Nineveh. He would go and fulfill the task assigned him. He would show up at the city and speak in the market square on the first day. On the second day, protocol would have the foreign prophet speak to the city councils and elders. On the third day, he might be presented to the king to deliver the message from *Yahweh*. It was a place where many deities were worshipped. It was not too uncommon for a foreign prophet to come bearing a gift for the king and a message from the gods of some land or people. As he trudged the path in the blazing sun, Jonah settled into his expectations over the protocol and procedure that awaited him. He wasn’t happy, but he was comforted with knowing what lay ahead of him.

Meanwhile, God was still in the process of shaking things up. After all, *Yahweh* has been in the business of change and transformation since creation itself. He called light into being and immediately began alternating light with dark, night with day. God had established seasons, tides, changes of foliage, and all the other cycles of life in a world of constant flux. Try as we might to stop the constant barrage of change, the world changes around us. Despite our attempts to create a static, ordered, and perfectly planned existence, God had set change into the very DNA of creation. Jonah did not like the changes God was working in his life. Neither did he realize all the changes that were yet in store.

Arriving in Nineveh, he did not make it through the first day of protocol. The king immediately heard the news of *Yahweh*’s word as the people became *Yahweh*’s mouthpieces, ignoring Jonah and taking up the message of *Yahweh*’s prophetic call. Jonah was put out. He took himself outside the city walls with all his contempt and sense of loss. After all, he was the prophet, *Yahweh*’s spokesman, the important one here! Yet these idolatrous enemies of the chosen nation of *Yahweh* had usurped his position and taken it upon themselves to repent in sackcloth and ashes!

As Jonah stewed in his anger and injured self-righteousness, God spoke again. “Jonah, it is time for some real change. It is time for you to understand how I would have all nations, even your enemies, as my people. You have settled down too deeply in your comfort to understand that I created you to care for all of my creation. Your self-importance has made you forget that while you are my mouthpiece, it is my will to love and care for all. If you would serve me, you must be willing to be radically changed from the inside out—not to seek a comfortable hiding place from the world, but to love even as I do.”

God is the originator of change—transforming with meaning and purpose. The gospel of Christ would radically alter our lives. God would transform us as emissaries of grace. After all, what’s the difference in refusing life in Christ and fighting the transformation by which God makes us his own?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*