

Do you like surprises? Some years ago one Dad in Montgomery, Alabama decided to give his family one huge surprise. This Dad really loved his family so he helped them to plan a vacation...without him! Unfortunately, the press of his business would keep him from going with them and tied to work. But he wanted to make sure that his duties didn't keep his family from enjoying a vacation, so this Dad helped his family plan each day of their camping trip. They would begin at home and drive to California, and then back home to Alabama again. Each day was carefully and precisely arranged---even the exact highways that they would travel and the places that they would stop. This Dad knew the route...the time that they would reach each state planned almost to the hour. But it was what he failed to tell them that made the difference. The father took off work (he had planned to all along) and arranged to have himself flown to an airport where his family would be on that particular day of the trip. He then took a taxi from the airport to the exact spot on the road where his family station wagon would eventually pass. With a wide grin, he sat on his sleeping bag and waited for the arrival of his family with the car packed full of kids and camping gear. The moment finally arrived! He spotted the family station wagon coming down the road, so he stood up and stuck out his thumb. Can you just picture what his kids did in that car? "Hey, Mom, that guy looks kinda like Dad...it is Dad!"

Later, when he was asked by a friend why he would go to all that trouble, this creative father replied, "Well someday I'll be dead and when that happens, I want my children to say, 'You know Dad was a lot of fun.'"

Chuck Swindoll was on to something when he said, "*Surprises come in many forms and guises: some good, some borderline amazing, some awful, some tragic, some hilarious. But there's one thing we can usually say – surprises aren't boring.*" Do you like surprises?

Most people are familiar with the book of Jonah. We learned the story of Jonah and the whale when we were still toddlers. But the book of Jonah is a whole lot more than just Jonah and the whale. It's much more than a fish story. An essential part of this book is the "surprise factor." In fact, those first readers of Jonah would have been astonished, even scandalized. What we glibly pass over would have thrown Jonah's first readers into a state of shock. They'd have been reaching for the Prozac. This short little book of just 48 verses would have had them dropping their mouths wide open in complete astonishment. So what's the big deal?

From now until almost Thanksgiving we're going to be working our way through this small Old Testament book. This morning we want to just read the first six verses (p. 654) but let me encourage you to take a few minutes this afternoon to read the entire book, Jonah 1:1-6. As we launch out with Jonah this morning, we want to consider **Three Big Surprises**.

Big Surprise #1: God's plan is often a big surprise. Do you always do what you're told? If you're an emotionally healthy adult...probably not. It all depends on who's doing the "telling." For example, if a salesperson tells me that "I need to buy something..." most of us have some sales resistance. If one of your children tells you to do something, you'll evaluate on whether it is appropriate or if you even want to. But if a

police officer tells me that I need to pull over, I pull over. If the boss tells you to come to work early or to work on a different project, you submit and follow orders. *It all depends on who's doing the "telling."*

A) It's always a surprise when God speaks. *"The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai"*(1:1) is the normal formulaic phrase used when God spoke directly to a prophet or to someone being asked to participate in God's plan or mission in a special way. But it wasn't a normal experience. It didn't happen every day or even every year or decade. If you look at a concordance, you'll find that this phrase is used over 100 times in the Old Testament. That's not a lot for some 5000 years of history. Let's look at a couple of examples in 1 Kings 17:1-10a. It wasn't questionable or open for debate. It wasn't a "Lord, can we talk this over?" or "Are you sure?"

God's word was to have an immediate and obedient response. It was not open for debate, discussion or dialogue. A *"word of the Lord"* experience was unusual and rare. It was a privilege that the omnipotent, awesome God would break into human history to accomplish His will.

B) It's not usually a surprise who God speaks to. If I had to have surgery, I want a surgeon who has a track record and a good reputation. If my car starts clunking, I want to take it to a reputable mechanic, not "Cars R Us." With a big job, you go to someone reliable...that you can trust.

Most of us are not aware that Jonah was a famous prophet pre-Nineveh. So it wasn't a big surprise that God tapped him on the shoulder. Jonah had a national reputation. I don't think it would be stretching it to say that he would have been the "Billy Graham" of his day. Turn to 2 Kings 14:23-25 (p. 272).

God had already stretched Jonah once. Remember that during Jonah's time, the nation of Israel was divided between Judah in the South and the Ten Northern Tribes. Jonah was from Judah and God sends him to prophesy favorably for a Northern King, Jeroboam II. It would have been a bit like during the Civil War if a preacher from Atlanta was preaching victory for the North.

Now, Jonah's king, Jeroboam II, was an idolatrous and immoral king who brought nothing but evil to the land. Yet God in His mercy and grace told Jonah to prophesy to the nation that the territorial boundaries of Israel were going to be expanded. God was going to give territory back that had been taken generations earlier by the Syrians.

Things were going to be good even though they had a bad king. And God did exactly what He had Jonah tell the people He would do. Jonah preached and prophesied an expansion, and it happened exactly the way that Jonah had prophesied.

Because of this Jonah had great public success in the economic and military glory days of the northern kingdom. He was a popular prophet. Everyone liked to hear him preach! If Christian radio had existed back then, Jonah would have the time slot right next to James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* or Chuck Swindoll's *Insight for Living*.

It's noteworthy too that Jonah's name means "dove." You'll recall that the dove that Noah sent out from the ark returned with the branch of an olive tree – an enduring symbol of peace and compassion. Thus, the "dove" may symbolically imply God's attempt to rescue Nineveh from destruction and judgment through forgiveness and mercy. The "Dove" (Jonah) was God's chosen agent.

It's interesting too that in the Old Testament doves also moan and lament (Isa. 38:14; 59:11) as Jonah does in chapter 4. They were also birds of sacrifice (Lev. 5:7, 11), just

as Jonah does later for the sailors. Finally, the psalmist longs to be a dove (a Jonah) to flee from the terrors of death (Ps. 55:4-8). Jonah too flees like a dove from the terror of Nineveh.

While it's a surprise when God speaks and it's not a big surprise when God chooses a faithful prophet like Jonah to accomplish a big task...

C) It's a huge surprise what God will often ask us to do. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'* God asks Jonah for something huge, something off the wall, something extravagant. Verse 2 *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*

Mark it down. God rarely asks us to do something that we would do in our own natural desires or in our own strength. If it's not a God-thing, it probably is not of God. God didn't ask Noah to build a little rescue raft for his family but an ark large enough to save every animal. God asked Moses to take on Pharaoh, ask him to set free his slaves and then lead this huge nation out of Egypt. Hosea was instructed to marry a prostitute. David was given a "Giant" job. God doesn't usually ask us to do what is safe or "normal" from our perspective. And He certainly didn't do that with Jonah.

Jonah was being sent to Israel's greatest enemy. He was sent to preach a Hellfire and brimstone message to one of Israel's greatest foes. Notice verse 2, *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."* While it was not going to be a Sunday school picnic, in many ways we'd think that Jonah would jump at the task. God was going to finally give these people what they deserved. The Assyrians had already attacked and plundered his country. In modern times it would be like being sent to preach a message of judgment to Tokyo right after Pearl Harbor or to Kabul, Afghanistan right after the 9/11. "Hey! I've got great news!! God is going to nuke you!!" Of all of the prophets in the Old Testament, Jonah is the most patriotic and nationalistic. Gaebelien suggests that Jonah is the most Jewish Jew of all of the prophets. It was his chance to be the Fred Phelps of his generation. You remember Pastor Fred Phelps...he's the pastor that takes members of his church to Gay Pride Days throughout the country and holds up signs saying, "God Hates Fags." It was a Pat Robertson option, "Take out Chavez."

And if any group deserved judgment, it was the Ninevehites. They were barbaric. They were cruel and vicious. The Living Bible paraphrases the last part of verse 2 by saying that the wickedness of Nineveh was such that it *...smelled to high heaven*. And that's not a bad translation. The Assyrian Empire had a reputation throughout the ancient world for its wickedness and cruelty. One of their kings, Ashurbanipal was accustomed to tearing off the lips and hands of his victims. Another Assyrian ruler, Tiglath-Pileser, flayed victims alive and made great piles of their skulls. Assyrian soldiers had no qualms with scorched earth military tactics. Typically after destroying an enemy's fields and cities, they slaughtered the conquered people or hammered iron rods through their noses or lower lips and led them away as slaves. They would often dismember a victim yet leave one hand still attached so that with their sordid humor, they could shake it before the victim died. They would pull out the tongues and sex organs of live victims and burn children alive. To quote the Muppet's Christmas Carol, they were *"the worst of the worst, the most hated and cursed."* Yet that was exactly where God was sending

Jonah.

And Nineveh wasn't a small town. The city was probably a million people. The inner city had a wall 100' high and 50' thick that was eight miles in circumference. The city was a cesspool of filth and violence.

Now, Isaiah had prophesied earlier (7:17) that the Assyrians would successfully invade Israel. And, Jonah of course was familiar with this prophesy. In Jonah's day the Assyrians were making forays into the northern kingdom of Israel...sort of pre-invasion attacks. When the Assyrians were doing this...penetrating into a nation they hoped to conquer, they would make a surprise attack upon the city, take captive the women, and then brutally kill the men and children. It's within reason to suggest that Jonah had perhaps personally witnessed some of these attacks. He may have even seen his own father and mother brutally slain before his eyes or seen his sisters raped by the Assyrian troops. If Jonah did not hate the Assyrians, he certainly wanted to. And prophets were frequently asked to do the tough job. Nathan was sent to confront King David. Elijah was sent to tell Ahab God's judgment was falling on him. It was a surprise but it's certainly not extraordinary. It was similar to God's message to Abraham that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Big Surprise #2: Jonah's response to God's plan is a big surprise. When you think of "one of a kind," what do you think of? Well, add Jonah to your list of "one of a kind." Jonah is one of a kind and just because he was swallowed by a big fish. Jonah is the only prophet who is recorded as having run away from God. He's the only prophet who thumbed his nose at God and said "No...I won't go." The original readers must have done a big gulp when they read verse 3, *"But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD."* They did a double-take. No doubt they had to read it twice because they couldn't believe what they had just read. This was unheard of. No one ever told Yahweh no. No one blew God off. But Jonah did. It's a WOW moment!! The conditioned and expected response was for Jonah to purchase his ticket and head to Nineveh...but he doesn't.

Jonah is abnormal for a servant of God. He's the anti-prophet. Elizabeth Elliot writes of her husband, Jim Elliot's, uncompromising obedience and submission in her book, *Discipline: The Glad Surrender*. *"The disciple, however, lives by a different rule, a rule not natural to anyone who is a sinner. He will let himself be 'lost.' It is the great principle of the cross that he takes up--out of his own loss comes another's gain, out of his discomfort another's comfort. How easily we profess a willingness to follow, imagining some notable work for God, some great martyrdom—but forget the first condition the minute there is a little cold air on the back of the neck.*

When I was in college, it was the custom when the yearbook came out to ask one's friends to autograph it. Usually they wrote a few words in addition to their signature, and when a girl asked for the autograph of a man she especially admired, she secretly hoped for some clue to his feelings toward her in the words he wrote. Jim Elliot signed his name in my Wheaton Tower and added only a Scripture reference: 2 Timothy 2:4.

'A soldier on active service will not let himself be involved in civilian affairs; he must be wholly at his commanding officer's disposal.' The message was loud and clear. Any

hopes I might have entertained, any feelings Jim himself might have had for me that he had not at that time expressed, must give way before the guiding principle of his life. He was not at liberty to plan the future, being at the disposal of someone else.

Any 'soldier,' any candidate for Christian discipline, ought daily to report to his commanding officer for duty. 'At your service, Lord.' What the soldier does for the officer is not in the category of a favor. The officer may ask anything. He disposes of the soldier as he chooses. The very thought strikes horror to the modern mind. 'Nobody's going to tell me what to do. Nobody has a right to dispose of me.'

This pattern of thinking has its powerful effect on Christians as well, so that we have come to imagine that discipleship is somehow an 'extra.' We suppose that we can be Christians, going to church, saying our prayers, singing those sweet songs about loving and feeling and sharing and praising, without taking our share of hardship. Those who wish to make a special bid for sainthood, we tell ourselves, might try discipline ('it has its place') as though it were an odd or fanatical life-style, not the thing for most of us. It is as though we might be Christian without being disciples. 'Yes, I want to be a Christian, but no, I don't want to be Your disciple, Lord. Not yet, anyway. It's a bit much to expect.' 'Yes, I'll be a disciple, but no, I certainly don't want to leave self behind.' 'I'll leave self behind if You say so, Lord, but don't ask me to take up any crosses. I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable with that.'" Jonah was the prophet who did not want to report for duty. He goes AWOL. He's the anti-prophet!

And he doesn't just wander off, Jonah heads for the furthest point away from Nineveh. He takes a boat to Tarshish!! Tarshish was in Southern Spain...just west of Gibraltar. Why there? Well, it was the furthest point that he could go in the known world. It was some 2000 miles in the opposite direction from God's command. Jonah was going as far as he could go from where God told him to go. And the million dollar question is: **Why? There are basically four theories.**

1) Some think that Jonah fled because he was afraid. The Assyrians were brutal. Jonah knew that his message wasn't going to win his friends or influence people. Jonah didn't want to be martyr so he hit the road. Add to that the trip there would have been difficult and dangerous through other barbaric nations. But this doesn't really hold water. Jonah was not afraid to die. Later in this chapter he's willing to sacrifice himself to save the sailors and even has them throw him overboard where he would have drowned if it had not been for God's intervention.

2) Some suggest that it was job security. Jonah knew thought that if he went to Israel's enemies and they repented and were spared, he could never return to his native land and his former position. Or, if he prophesied judgment and it didn't happen, he would be considered a false prophet. But there is no indication that Jonah is a prophet with a pride issue, though he definitely had other problems.

1. **Some suggest that Jonah was concerned about God's reputation.** If

he went to Nineveh, prophesied judgment, and they repented...then Jonah knew that God would not judge them...and God would look bad. It would look like God was fickle, that He was schizoid.

4) Some believe that Jonah refused to go because he was just too much of a patriot. This one makes the most sense to me and this is what I believe. The text

indicates that though Jonah wasn't sure, he was afraid that they might repent. And Jonah wanted nothing, and understandably so from a human perspective, Jonah wanted nothing to do with helping these brutally wicked people.

Jonah knew that if he preached the sermon God had given him to the Assyrians in their capital city of Nineveh, there was a chance that they would repent. And if they repented, Jonah knew that our compassionate God would forgive them. Listen to what Jonah said in 4:2 after that indeed had come to pass, *"I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God Who relents from sending calamity."* In his hatred of the Assyrian people Jonah did not want mercy or grace for the Assyrians. On top of that he knew that Israel was living in rebellion against God. If Assyria repented, it would be easier for God to use them to punish his own country. God might even choose them over Israel. Jonah ran because he was a too much of a patriot. He wrapped his religion in the Star of David.

As we read these words carefully in chapter 4, we realize the reason why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. Those who lived there were the enemies of his people, the Jews. He was afraid that if he did go to them with his message of judgment, they would believe it and repent, and God would bless them. And Jonah did not want "those people" blessed! God could bless Israel. But Jonah would be damned (literally) before he would see God's blessing shed upon these enemies. So he fled to Tarshish! Today it would be like being told to go to New York and you head to San Francisco so that you can board a boat there to go to Hong Kong.

Jonah was like you and me. So often when we are wronged we don't want to forgive...whether it's a personal offense or a national one. Our big surprise is that God wants us to forgive our enemies. Instead we want our oppressors to be punished. We want them to hurt at least as much as they hurt us. This attitude is why Philip Yancey describes the book of Jonah as, *"a true-life study of how hard it is to follow the Biblical command, 'Love your enemies.'"* Jonah was blown out of his tree by what God was asking him to do. He just couldn't believe what God was asking him to do. He probably didn't but I'm sure he wanted to say, "Could you please repeat that God? We must have a bad connection. God, You're breaking up!"

Jonah is similar to other runners. Think about it. Couldn't he have stayed in Israel and said "No" to God. Instead he leaves God's chosen people and his position as a prophet. The author is making a point with this wording, *"He went down to Joppa."* Verse 5 *"Jonah had gone below deck."* Going down is a metaphor used of each of Jonah's actions. He goes down to Joppa, down to the port, down below the deck of the ship, and lying down, he falls into a deep sleep. Jonah seeks out a culture where he will not hear about God's faithfulness to His people, God's commandments or any reference to God. He is looking for a secular culture.

When someone runs from God (which is impossible), they stop reading the Word, they drop out of church, they do everything that they can to immerse themselves in a godless culture. Yet you don't have to physically run to run from God. Running from God is primarily spiritual and only secondarily geographical. And please mark this down, if someone decides to run from God, Satan will always have a ship ready to take you away. Jonah *"paid the fare"* but he really had no idea how much running from God really cost. Most runners don't.

In his preaching on Jonah, Donald Grey Barnhouse often called attention to this by

highlighting the phrase *“he paid his fare.”* He noted that Jonah never got to where he was going, since he was thrown overboard, and that he obviously did not get a refund on his ticket. So he paid the full fare and did not get to the end of his journey. Then Barnhouse added, *“It is always that way. When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. On the other hand, when you go the Lord’s way you always get to where you are going, and He pays the fare.”* Did you catch that, *“When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. On the other hand, when you go the Lord’s way you always get to where you are going, and He pays the fare.”*

Big Surprise #3: There’s a bit of Jonah in all of us. Isaiah put it this way, *“each of us has turned to his own way.”* The Apostle Paul said, *“All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”* (Rom. 3:12). All of us have our Nineveh.

I almost called this message, “My kind of prophet” because Jonah really is “My kind of prophet.” Too often, more than I want to admit it, I’m just like him...and so are you. We run from God. We flee His plan for our lives either out of fear of responsibility or fear of His will, or perhaps like Jonah, we run out of prejudice. We must train ourselves instead to run to God, to submit to His direction and then be wonderfully **surprised** by the joy, fulfillment and beauty of walking with and obeying our gracious God.

Friend, are you running from God this morning? Is there something that God is asking you to do and you’re on the wrong ship? Perhaps God has a lost person that He wants you to reach out to...maybe it’s someone that you just don’t like. Maybe you can’t stand them. Maybe God has been ringing your phone about our upcoming Friend Day. Maybe God is calling you to Himself and you have never even committed your life to Him.

Has God been asking you to do something that is shocking your socks off and you’ve been trying to run? Friend, this is no surprise. Like Jonah, you’ll find that you can’t run from God. Don’t wait till you get “swallowed” to do what God is telling you to do! All of us have a Nineveh but Ninevehs must be surrendered to the will of our Heavenly Father.