

“Don’t get stuck on stupid?” It’s to be the best phrase of the year. It was a classic line uttered by General Russell Honore who headed up the disaster response during the recent hurricane crises in the South and was given in response to silly questions by some reporters.

It’s easy to get stuck on stupid. Pastor John Ortberg had a man who was stuck on stupid in his church. Let me share Ortberg’s own account (and no, I am not making this story up.):

“Hank, as we’ll call him, was a cranky guy. He did not smile easily, and when he did, the smile often had a cruel edge to it, coming at someone else’s expense. Hank had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in oceans of happiness. He would always find a cloud where others saw a silver lining. Hank rarely affirmed anyone. He operated on the assumption that if you complimented someone, it might lead to a swelled head, so he worked to make sure everyone stayed humble. His was a ministry of cranial downsizing. His native tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way a prisoner carries a ball and chain. Although he went to church his whole life, he was never unshackled.

A deacon in the church asked him one day, ‘Hank, are you happy?’ Hank paused to reflect, then replied without smiling, ‘Yeah.’ ‘Well, tell your face,’ the deacon said. But so far as anybody knows, Hank’s face never did find out about it.

Occasionally, Hank’s joylessness produced unintended joy for others. There was a period of time when his primary complaints centered around the music in the church. ‘It’s too loud!’ Hank protested—to the staff, the deacons, the ushers, and eventually the innocent visitors to the church. We finally had to take Hank aside and explain that complaining to complete strangers was not appropriate and he would have to restrict his laments to a circle of intimate friends. And that was the end of it. So we thought.

A few weeks later, a secretary buzzed me on the intercom to say that an agent from OSHA—the Occupational Safety and Health Administration—was here to see me. ‘I’m here to check out a complaint,’ he said. As I tried to figure out who on the staff would have called OSHA over a church problem, he began to talk about decibel levels at airports and rock concerts.

“Excuse me,” I said, “are you sure this was someone on the church staff that called?” “No,” he explained. “If anyone calls---whether or not they work here—we’re obligated to investigate.”

Suddenly the light dawned. Hank had called OSHA and said, “The music at my church is too loud.” And they sent a federal agent to check it out. By this time the rest of the staff had gathered in my office to see the man from OSHA. “We don’t mean to make light of this,” I told him, “but nothing like this has ever happened around here before.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “Do you have any idea how much ridicule I’ve faced around my office since everyone discovered I was going to bust a church?”

Sometimes Hank’s joylessness ended in comedy, but more often it produced sadness. His children did not know him. His son had a wonderful story about how he met his wife at a dance, but he never told his father because Hank did not approve of dancing. Hank could not effectively love his wife or his children or people outside his family. He was easily irritated. Whatever capacity Hank once might have had for joy or wonder or

gratitude atrophied. He critiqued and judged and complained, and his soul got a little smaller each year. Hank was not changing. He was once a cranky young man, and he grew up to be a cranky old man.”

Hank was stuck on stupid! Jonah was stuck on stupid. Tragically, he’s not an anomaly. Too many believers get stuck on stupid. Like Hank, we can be orthodox, faithful in our church attendance, givers, read our Bibles, pray regularly...and still be stuck on stupid. Jonah was. Friend, please **Don’t get stuck on stupid!**

We’re coming to the end of a series of sermons on the life and ministry of the prophet Jonah. When we last left Jonah, he’d just delivered God’s message to the Ninevites. They responded by repenting of their wicked lifestyle and by putting their faith in God in what was the greatest revival in the history of the world. If the story had ended here, Jonah would have gone down in history as one of the world’s greatest prophets. To preach and have hundreds of thousands turn to God is no small accomplishment. But this account of the life and ministry of Jonah the prophet doesn’t stop here because this is not just a story about God’s love for the wicked Assyrians. It is also a story of His grace-driven love for an angry, pouting prophet...a very immature Hebrew preacher who was **stuck on stupid**.

When you look back at the story from this perspective you can see that in chapter one of this little book *Jonah acted like the prodigal son* but now in the fourth chapter *he’s acting more like the pouting elder brother* (Luke 15). Jonah is angry that the Ninevites have repented and come home to God, but the story is not over because God’s work was not complete. The Ninevites were doing fine at this point—but not Jonah. He still needed a lot of work.

Please mark it down, God is not satisfied with mere compliance to His will which is apparently what He got from Jonah in chapter 3. What God wanted was for Jonah to value what He valued and God knew this had not happened yet. Jonah was **stuck on stupid**. Are you? Am I? Turn again with me to Jonah 4 (p. 655). We’ve already read the story. As we make our way through this passage today, ask in your own heart, “Lord, am I stuck on stupid.” **If you’re taking notes, you’re stuck on stupid if...**

1. ...if you keep repeating the same stupid sin. *“When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened. **But** Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, ‘O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God Who relents from sending calamity’”(3:10-4:2).* We’ve mentioned throughout this series that Jonah is a surprise book. Here’s another one. Jonah’s response to this revival is a huge surprise.

Put yourself in Jonah’s place as he surveys this incredible response to God’s Word. These wicked Ninevites hear the good news wrapped up in the bad news of judgment, and the entire city repents of its evil ways. All the people put on sackcloth, sit in ashes, and fast because they believe God. How would you feel if you were, say, leading a Bible study and everyone in the study responded in a mass movement to the good news of the Scriptures and turned their lives over to Christ? Wouldn’t you be excited? But Jonah has the opposite response. He’s **stuck on stupid** and hasn’t learned a thing. Listen to

his prayer, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish.” After storm school, after the sailor revival, after fish belly school, after a prayer for deliverance, after the world’s greatest revival—Jonah still doesn’t get it. Nineveh changed but Jonah is still Jonah. His attitude and heart before God’s command to go to Nineveh is still the same post-Nineveh revival. Jonah knew God wanted Nineveh to change and he didn’t want that. But what he never figured out is that God wanted him to change. He’s a bigot. He’s a reverse Nazi. In his theology Jews are the super race and a holocaust of all Gentiles was totally acceptable. God is trying to give Jonah a world vision, to plug into God’s heart. But Jonah is stuck in the sin of prejudice.

At our house we have a family slogan, “If you’re going to make mistakes, make new ones.” With Jonah it’s the samo-samo. But Jonah had the same problem a lot of Christians have. Jonah doesn’t think that he has anything to learn. He believes he’s arrived spiritually. Sure, he might admit that there need to be some minor adjustments but he’s feels that he’s pretty much got his spiritual act together.

One of my greatest fears in ministry is that I’ll get stuck in the past. I have older friends in the ministry who got stuck. They became unteachable. They never read anything new or listen to a new idea. I’d rather the Lord just call me Home before I do that.

Jonah suffers from theological atrophy. Years before he came to the conclusion: *God is forgiving, therefore it does not matter how I live*, and he won’t learn anything different. Isn’t it amazing how a person can come to a conclusion early on and never change? How often do any of us periodically examine our own conclusions, things that we’ve assumed to be true which we concluded a long time ago? Many Christians believe a certain thing because they read one book and they haven’t had a new idea since. Or perhaps they heard one sermon or one preacher that they particularly liked. For most believers their standard of spirituality and Christianity is the church, ministry or pastor where they had their most significant growth, usually right after they were saved. And they get stuck there.

As Christians, we are to be thinkers. Yet too many believers are lazy and content to have someone tell them *what* to think. Christianity teaches a person *how* to think. But the easy way out is to come to a conclusion and then just ride it for all it is worth. We “know” what we believe so don’t confuse us with the facts.

Truth never fears scrutiny. If we’re right, we’re willing to be questioned and hear other perspectives. The problem with most of us is that we have an arrested theological development. We go back to the way we always thought and don’t want to be shaken. Jonah does this, see that phrase, “*When I was yet in my country...*”

Some years ago a man confronted me and said, “You know, in our old church, we used to do it this way.” And I replied to him, “Well, I bet that they’ll take you back.”

At Grace Church, we’re not overly excited when believers from other evangelical churches come our way. Sometimes God providentially moves someone in from another area and there are times when God leads someone to our church from another church. Frequently though we discover that if someone has left an evangelical church because of a “problem,” our church will soon be the “problem.” Too many Christians today play musical churches because they already know everything, they’re Jonahs. They suffer from hardening of the categories. They’re unteachable and bounce from church to church looking for the perfect one that does it just like they know it should be

done. But there are no perfect churches. And sadly, what they miss is that God wants them to grow and learn. But they don't get it, because like Jonah, they already know everything.

A few years ago we actually had someone say, "We believe that God led us to this church to fix you." What arrogance!! And how frightening!!

Christian friend, if you're stuck on stupid like Jonah, if you think that you have all your theological ducks in a row, you're wrong. God wants all of us to keep growing in grace until He graduates us and takes us Home. We need to keep discarding sin and distorted theology, growing to be more like Christ instead. As the writer of Hebrews challenged, *"let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Heb. 12:1). Friend, are you stuck on the same sin like Jonah was? Are you still repeating the same sin that you did five years ago? Ten? Twenty years ago? If you're not growing, if you're not even baby-stepping spiritually, then you're probably stuck on stupid. Don't stay there. Grow! Change...start today!!

2. ...if you have succumbed to unresolved bitterness. *"Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry"* (v. 1). The word translated *displeased* comes from the Hebrew verb meaning *to be evil* or *to be bad*. According to Jonah's stagnant theology, the deliverance of Nineveh was evil. And it ticked him off. The word *angry* comes from a verb meaning *to burn* or *to be kindled*. Today we'd say that *Jonah was burned up over the situation*. To him it was a disaster that Nineveh had averted disaster.

Jonah was bitter at Nineveh and now bitter with God for sparing them. Did you know that bitterness is the secret sin of most believers? Unresolved issues...issues that are not forgiven, soon give way to anger. Anger that is not resolved goes covert, festers and becomes bitterness. Mark it down. One of the symptoms of bitterness is a quick trigger. Friend, if you tend to go off quickly, then look inside. It may be an unresolved bitterness issue. You see, when we're bumped in life, what's inside will come spewing out.

And please note this, all bitterness is ultimately against God. Jonah is bitter at the Ninevites. The book never tells us why but Jonah hated them but that bitterness finally turns its aim toward God. Jonah blows his stack with God. Listen again to his "prayer" in vs. 2, *"O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."* He blames God for his own rebellious cruise to Tarshish. He even throws Scripture in God's face quoting Exodus 35:6-7. But instead of using this familiar text to praise God, Jonah angrily uses it to complain and accuse Him. He says in essence, *"I left home because I knew You would do this, Lord! I knew that You were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. I knew how easily You could cancel Your plans for destroying these people!"* While there's nothing wrong with Jonah's theology, there's plenty wrong with Jonah. He's orthodox but his attitude is pagan all the way through.

Bitterness is self-induced misery that produces chain sinning. A chronically bitter person is their own worst enemy. Frequently, they are a friendless individual. It's very difficult to maintain a relationship with them because you never know when you're going to have a meltdown. And just like Jonah, they blame everyone else...their spouse, their children,

the economy, some past mistreatment, their parents, their job, their church, their pastor and ultimately, if their really honest – God.

Famed New York City Pastor, David Wilkerson, said in a sermon, *“I believe there is nothing more dangerous to a Christian than to carry a resentment against God. Yet I am shocked by the growing number of believers I meet who are peeved at the Lord. They may not admit as much-but deep inside, they hold some kind of grudge against Him.”* That’s Jonah. He’d obeyed. He’d done what God wanted. And he believes God should reciprocate. Is that you? Are you filled with bitterness because you believe that God has done you wrong or that He owes you?

What Jonah does here is Satanic. He quotes God’s Word to accuse God. That’s Satanic methodology. He did it both in the Garden and when he tempted Jesus. Friend, are you doing that? Are you ticked at God? Do you quote His promises and accuse God of failing to keep them?

Jonah is enraged because God is *“gracious...compassionate...slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”* He’s not praying. He’s chewing God out. He’s reading God the riot act.

That’s because Jonah would have rather been an undertaker’s assistant to bury Nineveh than to undertake to assist in saving Nineveh. Jonah, unlike God, does not believe that evil should be forgiven. He would not forgive the Assyrians for their war crimes and is incensed that God did. Jonah wishes that Nineveh was dead! He hates them.

Are you bitter? Is there someone you hate? That you wish was dead? Is there someone that if they passed away, you’d have a hard time shedding a tear? Maybe it wouldn’t even bother you if they went to Hell because they were Hell on earth to you? Then you’re like Jonah. He was stuck in bitterness...are you?

3. ...if you have too high of opinion of yourself. *“Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live”* (v. 3). Does this sound like someone else in Scripture? It’s pretty much verbatim what Elijah said years before. Jonah is having an Elijah moment (2 Kings 19). You’ll recall that Elijah uttered these words after Queen Jezebel put a contract out on him. But Jonah is no Elijah.

It’s a bit like that classic line from the Vice Presidential debate in 1988 between then Senator Dan Quayle and Senator Lloyd Bentsen. Quayle opened himself up when he said, *“I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency.”* And Lloyd Bentsen retorted, *“Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.”*

Well, Jonah is no Elijah, but he seemed to think that he was. And what a difference between the two. Elijah had brought in a great revival and was afraid that it would not continue. Jonah too had brought in a great revival but he was afraid that it would continue. Elijah wants God’s will. He wants God to show mercy but Jonah does not. Jonah is stuck on stupid because he thinks that he is somebody, that he deserves better. So he prays to die. Friend, have you ever prayed to die? That’s a lack of surrender and trust in God and His plan. Do you get discouraged, disconsolate because you feel that you deserve better? That God owes you something more?

Verse 4 is probably the most important question in the book. *“But the LORD replied,*

'Have you any right to be angry?'” Jonah never answers the question. You see, Jonah deserved God’s judgment, and so do we. He had no right to be bitter and my friend, neither do we. The only thing God owes us is the same thing that He owed Jonah and Nineveh...His judgment. And we should be overjoyed with His undeserved mercy and grace. But we’re not because we’re stuck on stupid and somehow think that we deserve better.

4. ...if you focus on the trivial. Mike Yaconelli once wrote, *“Petty people are ugly people. They are people who have lost their vision. They are people who have turned their eyes away from what matters and focused, instead, on what doesn't matter. The result is that the rest of us are immobilized by their obsession with the insignificant. It is time to rid the church of pettiness. It is time the church refused to be victimized by petty people. It is time the church stopped ignoring pettiness. It is time the church quit pretending that pettiness doesn't matter. Pettiness has become a serious disease in the Church of Jesus Christ — a disease which continues to result in terminal cases of discord, disruption, and destruction. Petty people are dangerous people because they appear to be only a nuisance instead of what they really are — a health hazard.”*

Friend, are you petty? Do you get hung up on the trivial? What’s your gourd? Look at vss 5-11. God allowed this plant, probably a castor-bean plant which grows quickly, sometimes to ten feet high. It looks a bit like a palm tree and it gave Jonah shade. Please notice that this is the only time in the entire book that Jonah is happy. But just as it grew quickly, it quickly dies. And Jonah moves from happiness to rage. He’s tickled pink with the vine shade but madder than a snake when it dies. He’s stuck on the trivial. Friend, what makes you happy? What ticks you off? Is it really worth it?

This reminds me of a time when Tony Campolo spoke at a pastor’s conference in Maryland a few years ago. As part of his message he angrily said, “Yesterday 30,000 children around the world starved to death and you don’t give a ‘blankety blank.’” And those pastors were ticked. Then, Tony Campolo said, “The sad thing is that you pastors are more upset that I said ‘blankety blank’ than you are that 30,000 children starved to death yesterday.” A silence descended over the room and almost in unison every pastor slunk back into his seats thinking, “he’s right!”

While that doesn’t justify rotten language, most of us like Jonah have our priorities all out of whack. We’re happy with the trivial and temporal. The typical Christian gets all upset about things that they shouldn’t get upset about but they don’t get upset about things that they should get upset about. So what stuff upsets you? What’s the last thing that you really got bent out of shape over? Was it a “gourd?”

How did our priorities get so mixed up? When did we become so calloused to human need?

Jonah is all upset that he’s a little hot and uncomfortable but he doesn’t give a rip if a whole city gets eternally hot and goes to Hell. Frequently, we hear the term, “he/she is a Jonah” and we think of the running from God part. But we show our Jonahitis when we run against God. We get caught up on our gourds, and almost all of us have one. Our pet doctrine, style of music, worship, dress code, hobby horse, etc. And while we get all bent out of shape over our gourd, our world, the guy you work next to, your neighbor, your beautician or barber, your friend or family member is going to Hell.

That’s why we’re Jonahs. Not because we run from God but because we don’t have

God's heart. Jonah cared more for his personal comfort than he did the eternal destiny of an entire city of at least 120,000 people. It's all about Jonah. And we do the same. It's all about my problems, my hassles, my burdens, my discomforts, my situations. It's me, me, me. We too have our gourds. **And we're stuck on stupid because we focus on the trivial and completely miss the important.**

Conc: I like happy endings, don't you? But the book of Jonah doesn't have one. Someone has dubbed Jonah an "unfinished symphony." The story just suddenly breaks off. God's question is never answered, "*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*" Jonah may have never gotten it. Will we?

The message of Jonah is that we are to have God's heart, we're to care for what He cares for...lost people...that they receive His mercy and are spared His judgment. We who have experienced and benefited from God's mercy should be the most merciful. We who have been forgiven so much should be the most forgiving!

But Jonah never got it. He was stuck on stupid. He never got over his sin of prejudice. He's still bitter and angry as the book closes. He still has a high opinion of himself and he's hung up on the petty. But how about us? Are we stuck on stupid? Are we modern day Jonahs? Jonah never learned the lesson that God was trying to teach him. Have you? Or are you stuck on stupid?