

Jonah: Unwanted Calling, Unwanted Assignments, Unwanted Grace [borrowed and edited from a now unknown source]

By Bob Young

Introduction

“What is the worst job you have or the hardest to fill?” Cleaning out chicken houses!

→ Many churches seek God’s guidance and direction: *“Lord, we want to serve Your Kingdom purposes. What assignment do you have for us? How can we participate in Your Kingdom mission in the world?”*

→ What if the Lord advertised this Kingdom assignment: **Wanted--Church that will accept the assignment of being healthy, growing, successful church with steadily increasing worship attendance, steadily increasing budget and giving, facilities for programs for all ages, outstanding worship, state-of-the-art technology, outstanding children’s and youth programs that will be the envy of every other church in the area, and a thriving ministry attracting committed Christians in the area having good jobs, good incomes, winsome personalities, and wholesome families who are eager to tithe and actively serve in the church.**

→ How many churches would be willing to accept that assignment and become that church?

Isn’t that the church most church leaders and members long for? Aren’t most churches already competing against one another to become that church – the church with the best worship, the best children’s and youth programs and the latest technology and the most winsome staff and the most innovative marketing and programming to attract the cream of the crop families in the area?

All over our area – and all over our nation – churches are tripping over themselves to get in line for that kind of Kingdom assignment.

I. UNWANTED KINGDOM ASSIGNMENTS

- Meanwhile, there are other Kingdom assignments that are going begging for applicants:
 - Wanted: *Church to love, feed, clothe, house, mentor and disciple homeless people and addicts*
 - Wanted: *Church that will devote personnel and resources to serving, evangelizing and making disciples of trailer park residents*
 - Wanted: *Church to extend Christ’s love to families living in urban low-income housing projects*
 - Wanted: *Church that will develop effective transformational ministry for juvenile offenders and recently-released felons*
 - Wanted: *Church that will lavish love and resources upon orphans and fatherless children*
 - Wanted: *Church that will send its most gifted, well-trained and spiritually alive young adults to incarnate the love of Christ in the slums or AIDS-stricken villages or Muslim strongholds*
 - Wanted: *Church that will devote major resources to planting churches and advancing the Kingdom of God in the poorest and most-unreached villages*
 - Wanted: *Church that will passionately pursue putting an end to the global trafficking of women and children in economic and sexual slavery*
 - Wanted: *Church to extend Christ’s love/compassion to unwanted immigrants and unwanted children*
 - Wanted: *Church that will channel much of its resources toward the hardest-to-reach and toward those with the least to offer*
 - How many churches are waiting in line to accept that kind of Kingdom assignment? While churches try to out-do one another to reach the same kinds of easier-to-reach desirable people with more to offer, Kingdom assignments to reach the less-desirable and harder-to-reach people are shunned. What is your worst job? What is your hardest-to-fill job? We’ll gladly take that assignment!
- If we have ears to hear – we may hear God’s voice as it applies to our visioning process

We are asking Him to reveal His vision and agenda and direction for us for these upcoming years – what if we were to approach the Lord with this kind of attitude:

Lord, what are some of the hardest-to-fill assignments in your Kingdom work--we will accept that kind of assignment. Let other churches continue to trip over themselves in their competition to attract the desirable people with the latest and the biggest and the best and the coolest and the trendiest. Of course, some of the world's beautiful and successful people might not want to be a part of a church like that....But I believe churches that are authentically Christ-like in extending and incarnating Christ's love to the least and hardest-to-reach will attract not only broken people looking for hope and a second chance in life -- but also the real cream-of-the-crop Christ-followers -- namely, those who come to church with a "How can I make my life count for the Kingdom of God" mindset rather than a "What's in it for me?" mindset.

II. JONAH'S RESPONSE TO AN UNWANTED KINGDOM ASSIGNMENT

The Lord gave Jonah this assignment: *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*

- Jonah was a prophet from 800–750 BC (contemporary of Elisha, Amos, Hosea) when the northern kingdom of Israel was engaged in a series of territorial conflicts with Syria (Damascus) – but the real threat came from world power Assyria with its capital in Nineveh (located on the Tigris River in what is today Iraq)
- Assyria was known as one of the cruelest Empires in the history of mankind
- Assyria was the nation that eventually conquered Samaria and Israel in 722 BC
- Assyria was feared and hated by Israel and the surrounding nations of that time
- Jonah didn't particularly care for that assignment and ran the other way—hopping aboard a ship bound for Spain on the other side of the Mediterranean—as far away from Assyria as one could go in the known world of that day

What made this assignment so onerous and repulsive to Jonah?

- Jonah may have feared for his life
- Jonah may have believed that the wicked Assyrians were hopelessly depraved and unworthy of hearing God's Word
- Jonah may have been convinced that preaching to the Assyrians was futile – that they were way too cruel and wicked ever to repent and believe in God
- Jonah may have harbored a deep personal and ethnic hatred toward the Assyrians for the way they cruelly abused their power by ruthlessly oppressing and killing other peoples
- Jonah may have been afraid that his mission would be a failure
- Jonah may have been even more afraid that his mission would be a success
- Whatever other motives propelled Jonah to head as far in other direction away from Nineveh as possible, Jonah's reaction in chap. 4 indicates that one of his fears was that God would extend mercy rather than wrath to Nineveh

You know the story: *Jonah was thrown overboard // swallowed by the great fish // repented from the belly of the whale // obeyed a second command to go to Nineveh // proclaimed: Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned // the king and all the people repented with fasting and sackcloth – and God had compassion on them and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.*

And what was Jonah's response to being the human catalyst for one of the most amazing and powerful spiritual awakenings in history?

Jonah 4:1-3-- (NIV) 1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 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 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah was displeased and angry and depressed because of the success he had feared. *Why?*

- Because Jonah wanted his enemies to be destroyed, not saved
- Jonah believed the Assyrians deserved God's wrath – not His compassion.
- Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh to preach the Word of God because Jonah didn't believe the Assyrians deserved an opportunity to repent.
- Jonah ran away from the Lord's assignment because Jonah's heart was opposed to God's heart and Jonah did not want to be an instrument of God's salvation for the hated Assyrians.
- Jonah was angry because God is gracious and compassionate toward undeserving sinners.
- Jonah believed that God's goodness should be shown only to Israel, not to Israel's enemies.
- Jonah viewed the Assyrians as being outside the scope of God's love and salvation.
- Jonah was jealous and angry that God would show mercy to wicked pagans rather than reserve His grace for His favored people Israel.
- Jonah had the view that God's love and favor is for US – not for THEM.
- Jonah would rather die than share the blessings of God's grace and salvation with such undeserving sinners.

III. OUR RESPONSES TO UNWANTED ASSIGNMENTS

Of course, we have nothing in common with Jonah, do we?

Jonah's fears and prejudices are completely alien to us, aren't they?

We would never run away from an assignment from the Lord the way Jonah did, would we?

Why is it that so many churches like ours are tripping all over themselves to get in line for certain select Kingdom assignments – while many other Kingdom assignments are about as popular with American evangelical churches as Jonah preaching to the Ninevites?

Perhaps Jonah headed for Tarshish because he feared for his life and safety – Nineveh was a dangerous place filled with violent people

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would take some of us – or our children – to dangerous places filled with violent crime or warfare or political unrest

Would we accept those assignments – or run the other way?

Perhaps Jonah headed for Tarshish because he feared that he would be persecuted for preaching a message of divine judgment

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would take some of us – or our children – to places where preaching the name and Gospel of Jesus Christ would invite persecution

Would we accept those assignments – or run the other way?

Perhaps Jonah headed for Tarshish because the task seemed impossible – how could one Israelite prophet succeed in turning the hearts of wicked pagans and idolaters to the one, true, living God?

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would take some of us – or our children – to such spiritually dark and evil places in the world that it would seem impossible that such people could ever turn to Jesus Christ and be saved

Would we accept those assignments – or run the other way?

Jonah headed for Tarshish because he had no love or compassion in his heart for the Assyrians – he didn't really care whether they got saved or not – in fact, in his mind they deserved God's judgment.

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would require some of us to extend Christ's love to people that we don't really love or respect – people we regard as adversaries or law-breakers or losers or as inferior to us – or as deserving of God's judgment.

Would we accept those assignments – or run the other way?

Jonah headed for Tarshish because his heart was out of sync with God's heart for the lost and sinful.

In fact, Jonah resented the fact that God would show compassion to wicked pagans, Jonah wanted nothing to do with being a part of God's mercy to Israel's enemies.

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would require a change of heart on our part, cleansing our hearts of some of our pride and prejudices and fears, aligning our hearts with God's heart for the poor and marginalized and oppressed and fatherless and aliens and minorities and the unwanted and the outcasts and the lost that are hard-to-love and hard-to-reach.

Would we open our hearts to such realignments – or run the other way?

Jonah headed for Tarshish because he did not want to share the blessings of citizenship in the Kingdom of God with the cruel and wicked Assyrians. The Kingdom of God was for Israel and for righteous Gentiles – and certainly not to be shared with pagans and enemies.

Some of God's Kingdom assignments would require us to welcome into our church fellowship children and youth and adults who would not be an easy fit in our predominant church culture – it would require us to share the blessings of salvation and fellowship in the body of Christ with people who are different from us – perhaps different race or ethnicity or social-economic status or religious background or life experiences or political views

If God gave us success in reaching different kinds of people for Christ – including some whom Jesus called “the least of these” -- welcoming them into our church fellowship and youth group and children's ministries and home groups could alter the social make-up of our church body

Would we accept such an assignment – or run the other way?

Would we welcome such success or become angry and resentful because too many of the wrong kinds of people were entering the kingdom of God and the fellowship of the church?

Biblical understandings clearly include the crisis of belief – when God reveals His vision for your life – the invitation to join God in that work He is calling you to do – which precipitates a crisis of belief and requires major adjustments on your part to be able to obey God and join Him in that work. The crisis of belief may be financial or it may have nothing to do with money and everything to do with heart attitudes.

It may have everything to do with counting the cost of approaching God with the attitude of: Lord, what are some of the hardest-to-fill assignments in the Kingdom of God, assignments that most churches would run away from – we would be willing to accept those kinds of unwanted assignments – extending Christ's love to people who are hard-to-love and hard-to-reach and hard-to-disciple and hard-to-include in the fellowship of the church.

And Lord – we are willing for Your Spirit to change our heart -- Please align our heart with your heart for the lost and the least, so we are willing to get our hands dirty in reaching people whom you love and yet who are neglected by most churches. Lord, we confess that there is something of Jonah's fears and prejudices and pride in our hearts – but we are willing for you to cleanse and change our hearts so that we can reflect the likeness of Christ and extend His love to the kinds of people Jesus ministered to during his ministry.

IV. THE BLESSINGS OF BEING A “SECOND-CHANCE” CHURCH OF “NOBODIES”

I know that some conservative Christians today look down their noses at the church in Corinth
And indeed, that church had its share of problems

But it was also a church in which all different kinds of people were experiencing the transformational power of the living Christ. 1 Corinthians 6:9 - 11 (NIV)

Just as Assyria was known for its cruelty, Corinth was known for its immorality

And some of that influence seeped into the church and was addressed by Paul

But that was also a church where immoral sinners were being saved in significant numbers
Corinth was filled with sexually immoral people and idolaters and adulterers and thieves and drunks and slanderers and greedy swindlers

That is the kind of people that many of the Corinthian church members WERE

But they were washed clean in the blood of Christ and were members of God's holy family

They were regenerated and sanctified by the power of the Spirit of the Living Christ

Before we look down our noses at the church in Corinth, let's examine ourselves: how are we doing on reaching out to such people?

God delights in displaying the riches of His glorious grace in Christ Jesus

And that glorious grace is most visibly displayed when broken and immoral and addicted and unwanted sinners are redeemed and given new life by the Lord Jesus Christ

For all its problems, the church in Corinth powerfully displayed the riches of God's glorious grace in Christ Jesus.

For all its problems, the church in Corinth did not run away from God's hard-to-fill Kingdom assignments.

For all its problems, the church in Corinth was not guilty of the kind of prejudice or social snobbery that would refuse to accept Kingdom assignments

And when they started to think a little too highly of themselves after being Christians for awhile, Paul reminded them that they were products of God's grace:

Consider I Corinthians 1:26-31. All across our nation churches are tripping over themselves trying to out-do one another in attracting "the brightest and the best" into their doors.

But in order to display the riches of His glorious grace, God deliberately chooses for His family men and women that the world overlooks and exploits and abuses, losers and nobodies, and He delights in giving these losers and nobodies a clean slate and a fresh start to magnify His grace in Christ Jesus

God is looking for churches who will accept Kingdom assignments to reach out to the least of these – the losers and nobodies of the world – lost, broken and unwanted people who need a clean slate and a fresh start

And God has blessed us all

I don't believe God intended that to be an anomaly -- a one-time deviation from the norm – rather I believe God intended that to be a distinctive mark – extending God's grace to broken people who need a clean slate and a second chance in life

There are people like that all around us

Some of them bear no resemblance to the brightest and best and most beautiful of society
They are not necessarily the ones that most churches are competing to attract

Some of them would be unwanted in most church fellowships or youth groups or home groups
But they are people for whom Christ died, they matter to God, God is looking for churches through which He can express His compassion and extend His mercy to alleviate suffering and to offer forgiveness of sins and new life and a place in His eternal Kingdom

These are hard-to-fill assignments in the Kingdom of God

Many churches follow the way of Jonah and run from these kinds of unwanted assignments

• What will our response be to the King of kings when He offers us a hard-to-fill assignment in the work of His Kingdom? Matthew 20:26-28