

# Fingerpointing: Joe the Prophet on Justice

Reconnect – November 9, 2008

**Text:** Jonah 1:17-2:10

**Key Thought:** God loves to show grace to unlikely people, and expects the same from us.

**But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, “In my distress I called to the Lord, And he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, And you listened to my cry...**

**Those who cling to worthless idols Forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, Will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good, Salvation comes from the Lord. And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah 1:17-2:10, NIV)**

**Intro: Q: What do you think of when you think of the word, “Justice”?**

- Justice delayed is justice denied
- Justice league
- Just desserts
- (Other answers)
- “An eye for an eye” (lex talionis)
- “You get what you deserve” – justice at its heart, it’s most regular and rawest, most direct form, straight-shooting for straight-talking regular joes, “Joe Six-Pack” or “Joe the Plumber” style

**Enter Joe the prophet (Jonah):**

- Which is good, because there’s a character found in the first part of the Bible, that fits that very description, and it’s all about justice
- Call him Joe – Joe the Prophet – though you might know him already as Jonah (mention US election)
- Not just a kids’ story, although that’s what we’re conditioned for
- Jonah is a regular guy from the sticks – from Galilee, where Jesus was from, but about 800 years before
- His parents named him “Dove” – in other words, “Pigeon” – you don’t get much more regular than that
- But he hears God, and obeys – he brings a message to the king of Israel (his country) that the battles are going to go extremely well, better than anyone else could ever predict – and it happens just like he said it would (see the story in II Kings 14 for yourself)
- If you’re a prophet, and you bring good news, and it actually comes true – well, that makes you about as rare as a 6-49 winner that wants to give it all away – and even more popular
- Jonah would have been a national hero – welcome in the King’s court, enjoying the respect and admiration of everyone in the kingdom
- And it seems that all of this attention and success goes to his head a bit
- Because the next time that God calls, Joe the Prophet doesn’t pick up
- You can read the story for yourself in the book of Jonah, a short story found in the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible – one of the easiest parts of the Bible to read, and one of the shortest – maybe three or four pages long – but here’s the nuts and bolts of it, anyway

## **The Story of Jonah:**

- God calls Jonah to Ninevah – rock and a hard place, no win situation for a political hero
- All About Ninevah – cruellest city out there – beheadings, dismemberment – not a tourist spot – the place where the most brutal armies got their marching orders to go around the world
- Jonah takes off for Tarshish, in southern Spain – the edge of the world, on a boat
- Bad times on the boat
- Jonah gets thrown overboard by some spiritually sensitive sailors, while he’s asleep – they are more in tune with God than he is
- Swallowed by the fish – don’t get sidetracked
- Comes to his senses (how could you NOT) and decides to see things God’s way
- The fish pukes him out on the seashore, and off he goes again
- By the time he gets to Ninevah, he is no doubt a real sight – half digested? Crazy? Stinky? Not wanting to talk about it – ever – again?
- The impossible – Ninevah, cruel and proud Ninevah – they repent
- Which ticks Joe off – cue the tree and the worm and the waiting
- He wishes he’d never come – he wishes Ninevah wouldn’t repent – He wants to DIE
- And God asks why would you care more about a tree than a whole city of 600000 people?

## **Read the text: Jonah 1:17-2:10**

**But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry... Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah 1:17-2:10, NIV)**

## **God throws a wrench into justice:**

- (not what we expect, not what Jonah expected, either, in terms of how we see the world and the way that we conduct ourselves -good people, doing our best, high moral standards
- The Assyrians are the exact opposite – the cruellest group going

## **Sometimes the least likely are the most receptive, but the kicker is this:**

- **Those that cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs... but I will sacrifice... what I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.**
- “Justice baggage” – the worthless idols we cling to – our attitudes about others, our judgementalism, our resentment – our arrogance and short-sightedness, our need to win, our need to build ourselves up at the expense of others

- Jonah had baggage like this in spades, while everyone else in the story was willing to drop their “worthless idols” (literally), he didn’t want to give up his figurative ones – all kinds of irony
- The sailors turn from their gods after they throw their cargo over the side of the boat
- The people of Ninevah turn to the true God of Israel, of Jonah, after he comes with the shortest sermon ever, “Forty days from now Ninevah will be destroyed!”
- In Assyrian, “*adi arbât ūmē ninua innabak*”, it’s 40 days to “overthrow” – when everything will be turned upside down
- Why does this city turn to God so quickly? Is this just a fictional story?
- And yet, history says that during this time, this city had been shaken – there had been a massive earthquake, and a full eclipse, as well as some military reversals – all the signs were saying that they were in trouble – and so when Joe comes, through God’s grace, they’ve already been prepared for his message
- But Joe the prophet feels that this is way too good for Ninevah – they deserve justice – and it ticks him off, really badly – Joe has anger issues
- In fact, by the end of the story, it comes out that Joe has more compassion for a plant, more feeling, more concern for its wellbeing, then he does for this huge city (two Barrhavens)
- Joe’s worthless idols are his desire to play God and his attitude towards these people – and as long as he holds onto those idols, he misses out on God’s grace and compassion – he gets a really rough ride from God – seasick, fish stick, plant trick – and he has to let go of his own metaphorical worthless idols if he is ever going to enjoy the kind of relationship with God that he really needs

### **What’s our justice baggage? Who do we believe is outside the range of God’s love?**

- There’s always irony when we try to take God’s place, as the handers out of justice
- There was a really weird story in the paper this week about an Alberta filmmaker named Mark Twitchell – seems he was a wannabe serial killer, like on his favourite TV show, Dexter
- Dexter is a show about a serial killer, but with a twist – the serial killer is sympathetic to the viewer, because he has a “code”- he only kills people who deserve it – the ultimate agent of justice
- Twitchell didn’t have a “code” – but do we? Do we have a code, like “Dexter”? Do our actions betray us? That certain people are better off without God in their lives? Or that we are better off if they are without Him?
- How do we view our co-workers? Our neighbours? Our family members? Anyone who is in our circle of relationships that isn’t pursuing God, or even that we don’t THINK they are?
- Do we hate them because of what they do? Or what they represent to us? Or do we write them off because it seems like they will never be interested in Jesus, and in what we have to say? And so we just keep the reality of God in our lives a secret, a whisper, a hurried passing by
- And if we do, are we pulling a “Joe the prophet?” He hated even the idea of Ninevah and everything it represented – and yet, the people in this city, not knowing their right hand from their left – did they deserve to be lumped in with the war crimes of their leaders, anyway? Was that justice?

- Like the Law & Order clip – you can make the argument that if you’re on the wrong team, that everything wrong is your fault – but God’s justice is bigger than that – and it’s bigger than trying to ensure that everyone gets what they deserve, too
- In fact, Ninevah gets what it DOESN’T deserve – another chance, before God, to change

### **Joe The Non-Prophet**

- Joe had become, without even realizing it, a “non-prophet”
- He had learned the lessons of his society and those around him so well, that when God challenged him on his view of justice – on who was automatically in the right and who was in the wrong – that he failed the test, completely
- And so the guy who was supposed to be speaking for God, wasn’t – because somewhere along the way, he had forgotten what God was really like – or at least, WHY God was the way that he was

**Key Thought:** God loves to show grace to unlikely people, and expects the same from us.

### **Conclusion: Remembrance Day**

- In two days we’ll be celebrating Remembrance Day, in honour of all those who have fought and today are fighting on our behalf
- Today in places all around the world our Forces are patrolling, helping, rebuilding, giving
- And in Afghanistan, they are fighting and giving their lives
- Whatever you think of the mission that they are on, they are over there serving each of us today – they are giving their lives for us, to us, on our behalf – that’s grace
- Jesus said, “Greater love has no-one, than the one who lays down their life for their friends” – and that’s what He did for US, so long ago
- Jesus gave His life for us, and He expects us to take the wrapping off of our lives – to embrace the people around us, to let them see and experience the life that runs through our veins, to act like Jesus did and give of ourselves – to open our hands, throw down our attitudes and prejudices and things that we think we know, and start helping others
- What do you need to let go in order to start showing that kind of grace? What’s keeping you dragged down and ineffective?

### **Response: Grace Like Rain**