

Yes, Even the Animals

‘Q: How do you communicate with a fish? A: Drop it a line! /
Q: Why did the fish cross the road? A: Cause it was hooked! /
Q: Where does a fish keep his money? A: In the River Bank! /
Q: Where do fish sleep? A: In a river bed. / Q: What is the difference between a fish and a piano? A: You can’t tuna fish. /
Q: Which fish can perform operations? A: A Sturgeon! / Q: If fish lived on land, in which country would they live? A: Finland.’

Whether brothers Andrew and Peter, and James and John would have appreciated these jokes or not we don’t know now, but they were all fisherman and well acquainted with the habits and lives of various fish. All their livelihoods depended on fishing. Since Mark mentions that James and John were accompanied by their father, and also hired hands, indicates that the Zebedee family were more than just a family of fishermen. They had a fishing business substantial enough to need a hired staff to run it. Consequently, with the exception of tax collector Matthew, those two might have been the most “well-to-do” of all Jesus’ inner circle of twelve disciples. While James and John were both hard-working fishermen, they along with their father ran the family business and supervised their employees. As such, in their fishing village, they probably would have been among the more prominent local citi-

zens. Which possibly might have been another reason for their mother to later ask for Lord Jesus to allow her two sons sit at Lord Jesus' right and left. Sounds to me like she had some interest in heavenly social advancement! Truly she hadn't the slightest idea of what she was asking! Which is why the Lord told her, "You don't know what you are asking!" as Matthew 20:22 reports.

But her two sons, were not only among Lord Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples, they and Peter formed what we could call the Lord's executive committee, His closest confidants, His most trusted aides. And yet all three of them were prone to gaffes and foot-in-mouth disease! And for us looking back on their multiple faux pas, we are somehow comforted. For if those three, the Lord's three most important chosen disciples, were such klutzes, well, there's obviously hope in abundance for us, too!

But they're not the only ones. By far! Unlike other religions' heroes, the Holy Bible paints our ancestors in the faith in all their glorious victories and ugly, sinful failures. No whitewashing in the Bible. Only the truth! Not least of these is the famous Jonah, the one of the huge fish fame. He's the man who got swallowed by a whale-sized fish, which God commanded to vomit Jonah out on dry land. Which was after Jonah had caused a great many other people a great deal of trouble, anguish and financial loss, all because of his disobedience of God's commands. Now he apparently had a very close, if sometimes adversarial, relationship with God. He spoke very frankly with God, bordering on insubordina-

tion! If nothing else, he was stubborn and quite set in his beliefs. God saw the exceeding wickedness of Nineveh, the great capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the superpower of the day. The northern kingdom of Israel was still nominally independent in those days, but stayed that way only if they didn't upset the Assyrian world order. As evil as the Assyrians were, God still loved them, for even they, as human beings, were all made in God's Own image. Yet their sins were mounting, piling up such that God would have to judge them. Before that, He would extend His grace by sending a prophet, Jonah, directly to Nineveh to warn them. Repent not, and suffer destruction. Repent, and be spared. It was rare for God to send a prophet so far away directly to a Gentile nation to warn them. Most prophets issued words from God to Gentile nations while remaining in the Promised Land. But the Lord singled out Jonah for this special mission.

Being the good Israelite that he was, Jonah had no love for the Assyrians. They dominated the ancient world, and in hardly a good way. Fact was, Jonah hated them, and was overjoyed that God had issued a warning of judgement to them. But he also knew that the mere fact that God was sending him to them meant that God cared enough to warn them! And if so, then there was a distinct possibility that God would not harm them. That was just unacceptable. And so Jonah determined that he would not deliver God's message. He boarded a ship sailing in the opposite direction. God was not pleased. God sent a storm. A very violent

storm, probably akin to a small hurricane. In terror for their lives, to do everything in their power to save themselves, the ship's crew threw all their valuable cargo overboard to lighten the ship and ride out the storm. To no avail. If anything, things got worse. When Jonah was confronted and he confessed to disobeying the One and Only Living God, the crew would have been justified in throwing him overboard for causing them such great loss. Yet they were compassionate, and only after praying to God to forgive them of his murder, they acquiesced to his insistence that they throw him overboard. Naturally, God was glorified when the winds and waves stopped immediately when Jonah hit the water!

It seems most likely that Jonah actually drowned, owing to the way he later described his ordeal and prayed in chapter two. But God sent the enormous fish to swallow him. God preserved Jonah's body in the fish for the three days and nights, as the fish swam back to shore and, at just the right place, vomited him out. And Jonah was resurrected. This time, he proceeded forthwith directly, "do not pass Go", to Nineveh and delivered God's message. As soon as he had preached it, he set off to nearby highlands where he could overlook the great city and watch as the Lord rained down fire and brimstone upon it to destroy it. As he waited, the people of Nineveh did what Jonah most feared. They listened to God's warning, took it to heart, and fully repented. Even the king, veritably then the most powerful man in the world, decreed that every citizen as well as *animal* in the city don sack-

cloth, burlap, and ashes in a national display of repentance, humility and submission to God. God saw, and spared the city.

Meanwhile, Jonah had built himself a little shack as he waited for the fireworks display of judgement that never came. The shack was hot, and God caused a sizeable bush to grow up and shade it. Jonah was truly grateful for the plant for it made it so much more comfortable as he waited. But the next morning, a ravenous worm that God sent ate through the bush's stem and the plant withered right away just as the sun began to beat down on Jonah. If that wasn't hot enough for him, God also sent a blistering east wind from the desert, enough to practically roast Jonah alive. And Jonah prayed exactly that, "Death is certainly better than living like this!" in verse 8. Verse 9 continues, "Then God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?'" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" So, since Nineveh was not harmed, Jonah was so angry that he wished to die. If only he had stayed drowned in the ocean!

Father God, though, made this whole episode less about the wickedness of Nineveh and more about Jonah's own attitude. The somewhat abrupt concluding verses of Jonah's prophecy declare: "Then the Lord said, 'You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?'" God's love was far greater than Jonah's. And

for that Jonah should be, and we can surmise, was, most shameful afterward. He repented again. And his whole ordeal was cited by Lord Jesus as a sign that verified Lord Jesus' Own identity and mission to save the world. As Jonah was dead in the fish for three days and nights, and then resurrected, so nearly 300 years later was Christ Jesus crucified, and then raised to eternal life three days later. God's compassion is truly very great. Indeed beyond our comprehension. He loves His creation, not just us people, but the animals, too. He makes a point to mention this in the final verse of the book. Recall He also arranged for the animals to be saved on Noah's Ark. He didn't have to do that. He could have just made new ones after the flood if He pleased.

Nineveh repented, and was spared. But it didn't stay repentant. Only some 50 years later, God used Assyria to judge the northern kingdom of Israel, exiling the people to the far reaches of the empire. But after repeatedly threatening Judah, only a century later, Nineveh itself was destroyed, falling to the Babylonians. The message is clear. Even the most wicked of nations, if they repent, will be spared, for as long as they remain submitted to the Lord. America today is also wicked beyond what most of us can believe. As Jonah was sent to warn Nineveh, so are we, God's people, sent to be examples of what God expects of America. We are to warn our neighbors as far as it is in our power, that God will destroy the wicked in this country, unless they, too, repent. For He loves everyone; yes, even the animals.

