

Raising a JONAH

By Michelle LaRowe Conover



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This article first appeared in the April 19, 2009, issue of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*. Used by permission.

Disobedient. Ignorant. Negative. Judgmental. Stubborn. Dramatic. Argumentative.

Although the adjectives above may read like a checklist describing a typical teenager having a bad day, they actually describe one of the Bible's better-known characters. While he's best known for ending up in the belly of a giant fish, Jonah has a lot more in common with today's teenagers than you may think.

It's no secret that teenage years are filled with parenting challenges, most often revolving around self-discovery – the sorting out of convictions, the bucking of authority, and the developing of independent opinions (which often radically differ from their folks'). These struggles are enough to make some parents wish they could escape into a fish's belly themselves.

But Christian parents can take heart. In one small book (consisting of just four short chapters), parents of teens can learn big lessons to help them successfully ride the waves of the teenage years.

Jonah's story

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' 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" (Jonah 1:2-3).

Jonah's story starts out quite simply. God gave him a specific command. And what did Jonah do? He ran. He hid. He was disobedient. But God wasn't going to let him off that easily. "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (1:4).

So Jonah went into the bottom of the ship and fell asleep, ignoring the situation at hand, unaware how his actions were affecting others. When his shipmates (who soon discovered Jonah was running from God) confronted him, he told them to pick him up and throw him into the sea, knowing then the raging storm would calm. God sent a fish that swallowed Jonah, and Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Inside the fish, in the depth and darkness of the ocean, Jonah repented and prayed to God for deliverance. And God heard him and answered him, commanding the fish to spit Jonah out.

God gave Jonah another chance, commanding him again to "go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (3:2). So Jonah went and announced to the Ninevites, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:4).

The Ninevites believed the message and cleaned up their act. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (3:10). Much of the rest of the Book of Jonah demonstrates the prophet's lack of compassion as he argues with God about God's mercy toward the city.

Raising your 'Jonah'

While the people and places may be different in this biblical narrative than in your home, the struggles, attitudes, and characteristics of Jonah may be a bit too familiar. In fact, if you replace Jonah's name

with your teenager's, you may be surprised at just how close to home this story hits.

But if we look closely at the story, we see that God understood Jonah, his struggles, and his emotions. We can use God's methods of "parenting" Jonah to parent our own teen during challenging times. The next time your teen throws a pity party, turns into a drama queen, or runs from what you (or God!) has asked him to do, put God's parenting methods to the test.

1. Give God the chance to bring issues to light.

As parents, we are right in wanting to know what's going on with our teens. But sometimes we push so hard to find out information, we don't allow God to make the unknown known. Just as God exposed Jonah's sin, He has ways of revealing sin in your child's life if you ask Him.

2. Hold your teen accountable. God didn't let Jonah just run away. Jonah had to answer for what he had done. Establish a system of accountability with your teen. If you notice she's heading down the wrong track, gently confront her and help her get back on track (Galatians 6:1-2).

3. Remember that although your teen may run from his circumstances, he can't run from God's presence (Psalm 139:7-8). God was still with Jonah even in the belly of a fish. Trust that God is with your teen, even in the moments when your teen turns away from God. Remember, sometimes your child will have to be in the depth of darkness to really call out.

4. God still paid attention to Jonah's needs, even though he was being difficult. When your teen acts like he doesn't need you or want your help, be a presence and meet his needs.

5. Be a parent of second chances. Just as God gave Jonah a second chance to be obedient, do the same for your teen.

6. Don't be moved by your teen's drama. God's actions weren't contingent on Jonah's response. Your parenting decisions must be made on what you feel is best for your teen.

7. Raise your teen to respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction. Don't overuse parental condemnation. With Jonah, it took God's dramatic conviction of sin to bring about right behavior. The Holy Spirit can bring your teen back to God and back to doing what is right.

8. When things get tough, trust God to get through. God will never stop trying to get your teen's attention. As with Jonah, God knows what it takes to get through to your teen. God is there, even in the moments of drama and self-pity.

9. Don't pass up teachable moments. Even when your teen seems unreceptive, clearly communicate godly expectations. God continued to teach Jonah about compassion, even when the prophet seemed unreceptive.

10. Ask questions. Sometimes all it takes is a rhetorical question to help your teen see things in a different light. The Book of Jonah ends with God's question to the prophet.

Jonah's story doesn't wrap itself up neatly. You and your teen will face some challenging times and unresolved issues. But if God could take a rebellious prophet and guide him, He can do the same for your child. You can trust Him to bring about the best in your teen's life.



Resources:

For more help with parenting, contact:

- Focus on the Family at www.focusonthefamily.com
 - Mom Sense at www.christianitytoday.com/momsense
 - Living on the Edge at www.livingontheedge.org/lotecomunity
 - Cloud-Townsend Solutions for Life at www.cloudtownsend.com/channels/parenting.php
- ### **Reading:**
- *Effective Parenting in a Defective World*, by Chip Ingram
 - *Dare to Discipline*, by Dr. James Dobson
 - *Boundaries with Kids*, by Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend
 - *Life on the Edge*, by Dr. James Dobson
 - *Bringing Up Boys*, by Dr. James Dobson
 - *Preparing for Adolescence*, by Dr. James Dobson