

## SECRET SMILES

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

(sermon idea from “Schtucke in Schadenfreude,”  
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**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
**Amarillo, Texas**  
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It was a plot straight from a 1980s Hollywood blockbuster: A true freshman quarterback, Trevor Lawrence, sporting long blond locks, led his team to victory in the college national championship game. In doing so, his Clemson Tigers felled the higher-rated reigning champs, the Alabama Crimson Tide, coached by one Nick Saban. David took down Goliath. The wood-be supervillain, with a penchant for winning, went down, and went down hard. He went down to a team led by 19-year-old Johnny Utah.

Saban was named by *Sports Illustrated* as one of “The Most Disliked People in Sports.” Why is it that many people don’t like Nick Saban? Jealousy? Tired of seeing him win? Feel like you’re watching the New England Patriots all over again?

If you’re a Clemson fan, were you more overjoyed that Clemson won or that Saban lost? There is a big difference, you know. What was in your heart?

What made the drama so thick was that Clemson is coached by an Alabama native and a University of Alabama alum, Dabo Swinney. For those who relish seeing Saban fall, it was the perfect climax to the film. The hometown boy came back and defeated the carpetbagger from West Virginia coaching his former team. Swinney even danced to “Sweet Home Alabama” after the victory.

If history has taught us anything, it’s that Saban will likely be back, and he will have his vengeance.

If you enjoyed seeing Saban suffer, savor the moment, celebrate Swinney and Lawrence’s victory, look forward to more wins from the Tigers, but know that while Saban doesn’t necessarily smile when he succeeds, he’s not really frowning after a loss. He’s plotting, and the next championship game is only a year away. (Rich Cromwell, “Despite a Nasty College Football Defeat, Nick Saban Will Get Vengeance,” [www.the.federalist.com/2019/01/10](http://www.the.federalist.com/2019/01/10))

I found a “Peanuts” cartoon where Linus says to Charlie Brown, “Pain looks great on other people.”

How about you? Have you ever taken joy in someone else’s fall? A little pleasure in someone else’s pain?

“In forty days, Ninevah will be overthrown.”

That was the beginning and the end of Jonah’s sermon to the Ninevites. Amen. Let’s go home.

Jonah wasn't creative. He didn't use relevant stories or catchy illustrations. He didn't repeat himself for emphasis. He just declared. "Forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown." That was the message that God had given him to preach. Quite frankly, he wasn't very happy about preaching it – of all things, this preacher was afraid that his sermon just might succeed. He was not afraid of failure – he was afraid of success.

Let me set the scene for you. He's more reluctant than Amos. More fearful than Jeremiah. Less confident than Hosea or Isaiah. Yet Jonah comes to us as one of the most successful of all the Old Testament prophets. While the other prophets stand firmly, with feet on Israelite soil, proclaiming God's word to God's chosen people, Jonah, however, is sent away to declare God's word to a strange people in a foreign land. And he is amazingly successful.

Jonah lived in the vicinity of Galilee. He was the son of Amittai, and God's call comes to him during the eighth century, during the reign of King Jeroboam II, to go to the great Assyrian city, the city of the enemy, the city of Ninevah. God comes and says, "Go."

Look at chapter 1, verse 2.

Arise (it's the word of the Lord, verse 1), go to Ninevah the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.

Jonah arose and went, all right. But he didn't go to Ninevah. In fact, he went the wrong way. He found a ship – not going northeast. Rather, he heads in the opposite direction. He finds a boat in Joppa and goes west. Like a major league pitcher hurling a fastball, the Lord hurled a great wind (1:4) on the sea. The little boat was tossed to and fro in the hands of God.

The sailors panicked. "Everybody pray to your god. Everybody pray to your god." They begin throwing all the cargo overboard, trying to lighten the load and lift the boat.

Jonah was down in the belly of the boat, sleeping. The captain approached him. "What are you doing? Wake up. How could you sleep? Go call on your god. Perhaps your god will be the one to save us, and we won't perish."

They finally rolled the dice to see who it was that was causing God to hurl the wind. Double snake eyes fell on Jonah. "Who are you, and why are you here? Where did you come from?"

"I'm a Hebrew. I fear the Lord God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9).

"How could you do this to us? You're about to get us all killed. What can we do to appease your God so He'll stop hurling the wind that is tossing our boat?"

Jonah said, "If you'll just throw me overboard, the sea will become calm for you. I know I'm the one He wants."

The men didn't want to do it. They tried to just row the boat to get back to land. But they couldn't, because the sea was even more fierce. They cried out to the Lord, and they threw Jonah overboard.

The Lord sent a great fish that swallowed him. Even as the seaweed was wrapped around his head (Jonah 2:5), he prayed to God and vowed he would be obedient if God would give him another chance. The Lord commanded the fish to give up the contents of its belly, to purge the prophet – to puke up the preacher.

Jonah was more inclined to listen the second time. Look at chapter 3. It's just like the beginning of chapter 1. "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise and go to Ninevah the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.'"

This time, Jonah gets up and he goes. He walks about the city, preaching his one-sentence sermon. "Yet forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown."

Jonah didn't mind the preaching part. He was just afraid that they would really listen. He was happy to preach the hellfire and damnation sermon to the Ninevites. They were the dwellers in the capital of Assyria – they deserved it. Horrible people. Nasty habits. They were God's longtime enemy.

The Assyrians had, upon occasion, humiliated and crushed the Israelites. They had stripped them of their culture and their land. Surely God would never ever forgive them. And, it goes without saying that God did not love them. They had attacked God's precious people.

So God gives the task to Jonah of preaching prophetically to the horrid heathens in Ninevah.

But he was afraid. That's why he didn't go the first time. He wasn't afraid of failure. He was afraid of success. He was afraid that the people of Ninevah would listen to the sermon and repent – and, worse yet, God might just forgive their wickedness.

Can't you see Jonah now? He doesn't put any expression into his preaching. Something of mundane mumbling as he simply says, "Forty days more and Ninevah will be overthrown."

He's astonished. His sermon is a breathtaking success. Out came the sackcloth, the sign of repentance. And into the fire went the little statues of fertility gods.

And how did Jonah respond to the repentance of the Ninevites? He was angry. He was absolutely livid. How dare God forgive them. How dare God change His mind and not obliterate them. How dare God forgive those unforgivable creatures. How could he love people when Jonah hated them.

Who is Jonah? He's the patron saint of all of us who have secret smiles.

Have you ever smiled, like Jonah did, enjoying someone else's calamity? Maybe just a little bit, turning up the corners of your mouth in glee when someone else gets their due. It wasn't that the Ninevites didn't deserve to be blown off the planet. They did. But God forgave because they repented.

Have you ever smiled just a little bit when things went wrong for the other guy? The competition?

**Tom Ketchum, a 52-year-old insurance agent in Wausau, Wisconsin, played it safe with his portfolio – didn't invest in any of the dot-coms. He was afraid they were too risky. All of his associates had cast their lot with the risky ventures. When the dot-coms fell, Tom Ketchum said, "I selfishly took a great deal of satisfaction when the (stock market) slid.... For months I had been listening to my associates brag about their newfound wealth while my investments were plodding along. The revenge was sweet." (USA Today, 4/18/2000)**

Tom Ketchum was like Jonah. Tom Ketchum had a secret smile. A smile one wouldn't be proud of, and a smile one wouldn't share with others – but just that smirk, that inside smile when things don't go well for others. Jonah was like that. He smiled thinking the Ninevites would be destroyed, yet secretly afraid that God would forgive them. Tom Ketchum smiled when his colleagues were actually losing money. He makes his comments at a time when the *USA Today* Internet 100 index was 31% off its high.

Or...

When you're in the middle of road construction and everybody knows they have to merge left. But the better-than-everybody-else buffoon in the Lexus luxury vehicle decides he's special. He rides the shoulder, passing everyone who is patiently waiting in the long line of frustrated drivers. Zipping to the front of the line, he expects to be let in because, after all, we can't expect him to wait like everybody else. When you finally make it to the merge point, you see that he's been pulled over by the police for disobeying the traffic cones and carelessly driving on the shut-off shoulder. Come on now...did you grin a little inside? I did, and it's wonderful!

It's an I-told-you-so mentality. It's a secret smile at the defeat of others.

Secret smiles. Have you ever had a smirk like that on your face? Somebody falls, falters and fails – and instead of frowning, you smile.

The news comes that person you can't stand, that girl who seems to have everything going for her – someone whispers in your ear, "Have you heard? She's getting a divorce. Her husband left her for a younger woman." She's getting a divorce, and you take secret delight in her calamity? You give a secret smile?

If didn't get you there, I'll get you here. You show up at the high school reunion – the 25th reunion – and the high school prom queen – Miss Perfect herself, the one that everybody adored, the one that didn't have so much as a freckle for a blemish on her face – shows up at the 25th reunion with 60 extra pounds. And you have the secret smile. Perhaps you even walk up and act like you don't remember.... "I don't believe I've met you. I don't remember you in school. Now, what was your name?" She was the little-miss-perfect prom queen, and now she has the dread of middle-age spread. And you enjoy a secret smile.

Or, how about when your boss, who is a terrible tyrant, gets the pink slip – they give him 15 minutes to clear his desk and go home, and they've already changed the locks on his door. Do you smile?

Or when a politician from the other party, who is known for his stance on family values, is found in an adulterous affair, is embarrassed and is forced to resign by political pressure. Do you smile? Smirk?

That secret smile means that in some way we find joy in hating, joy in the misfortune of our enemy. Jonah's smile is scary, because it's our smile. The smile of taking joy in the tragedy of another.

We usually smile at the misfortune of others, we usually smirk when we're carrying the baggage of bitterness. He always thought he was better than you were. He excelled in every way. He never acknowledged you for who you are or what you've done. He was a self-centered sort. Finally, he has his fall.

And you smile. You smile because you've been carrying the baggage of bitterness. Because you've been thinking about him way too much. **Ann Landers said to carry bitterness is to let someone you despise live rent-free in your head.** (Ann Landers, *The Washington Post*, 5/19/98)

**One day, two monks were walking through the countryside. They were on their way to another village to help bring in the crops. As they walked, they spied an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she could not get across on her own. The first monk kindly offered, "We'll carry you across if you would like." "Thank you," she said gratefully, accepting their help. So the two men joined hands, lifted her between them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way.**

**After they had walked another mile or so, the second monk began to complain. "Look at my clothes," he said. "They are filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff." The first monk just smiled and nodded his head.**

**A few more miles up the road, the second monk griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it is all because we had to carry that silly woman across the river! I cannot go any farther because of the pain." The first monk looked down at his partner, now lying on the ground, moaning. "Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked. "Your back hurts because you are still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago." (Dr. Anthony T. Evans, *Guiding Your Family in a Misguided World*, <http://sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bitterness.htm>)**

That's the way we are when we deal with other people that we're bitter toward, that we have resentment in our heart concerning. We're just like that second monk who cannot let it go. We hold the pain of the past over our enemies head like a stick, and we remind them every once in a while. We bear the baggage, and so we have secret smiles when they fall.

Look at Jonah's story. They repent. The king of Ninevah (3:6) got up off the throne, went into a state of mourning, and proclaimed that not a man, not even an animal would eat anything or drink

any water. Rather, they could call on God that each one would turn from their wicked way and from the violence they had committed.

Notice verse 10. When they repented, God relented. He forgave them. He declared He would not bring the destruction of the city upon them.

But look at Jonah – the one who was successful in his preaching. It displeased Jonah (4:1). “That’s why I got on the boat bound for Tarshish, Lord. I knew you were like that. I knew you were gracious and I knew you were compassionate. I knew you were slow to anger. I knew you were loving. I knew you were one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore, Lord, just kill me. It is better to die than to live and see these Ninevites receive your grace.”

“What right do you have to be angry?” God asks.

Jonah goes out from the city. He made a little shelter for himself, and he sat under it – just so he could see what might happen to the city, to see if God would destroy it. The Lord sent a plant to grow up overnight to give him shade. And Jonah was so happy to have the shade of the plant. But then God sent a worm, marching and munching until the plant was eaten up. It killed the plant. And then the sun came out, appointed by God, and the wind.

“Now what right do you have to be angry about that plant?” God asked.

“I had every good reason,” said Jonah, “every good reason to be angry about the plant withering.”

The Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And can’t I have compassion on 120,000 people in Ninevah?”

The secret smirk of Jonah. Some of you might even be disappointed to find someone you despise in heaven.

The secret smile. It’s the smirk of Jonah.

It’s easy to be glad over the calamity of others, to think they had it coming.

**Reminds me of a story about a Kansas preacher. It seems the preacher was returning home after a visit to New England, and one of his parishioners met him at the train station.**

**“Well,” asked the preacher, “how are things at home?”**

**“Sad, real sad, Pastor,” answered the man. “A cyclone came and wiped out my house.”**

**“Well, I’m not surprised,” said the unsympathetic parson with a frown. “You remember I’ve been warning you about the way you’ve been living. Punishment for sin is inevitable.”**

**“It also destroyed your house, Pastor,” added the layman.**

**“It did?” the pastor said, momentarily surprised. “Ah, me, the ways of the Lord are past human understanding.” (John C. Maxwell and Jim Dornan, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, B&P 12/30/99)**

God, forgive us when we take unrighteous joy in the fall of others.