

Introduction to free article.

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Article 17

17. Jonah, Obedience Testing

Introduction

Although the total events of Jonah's life are underrepresented, the book of Jonah gives a glimpse of God's intervention to develop him as a leader. God is involved in shaping Jonah's attitude about the Assyrians so that it conforms to God's. What is striking about this occasion is God's persistence in developing his character through different shaping processes⁴⁸ and critical incidents.⁴⁹

The shaping macro lesson⁵⁰ was first seen in the Patriarchal Leadership Era in God's intervention in Abraham's life and continues to be observed through the Church Leadership Era. It is a simple lesson:

God shapes leaders' lives and ministry through critical incidents.

The key shaping process is a paradigm shift. Jonah needs a change in his thinking about non-Jewish nations and his assumptions about God's concern, specifically for the Assyrians. Jonah must go through a paradigm shift in order to see that God is not exclusively for Israel. However, several other shaping processes are seen: ministry task, obedience check, isolation, and life crisis. This article will touch on all these shaping activities.

The First Two Shaping Activities in Jonah's Life

Jonah's first critical incident is the call to preach to the Ninevites. This incident illustrates two major processes that are common to God's shaping of many leaders. These

⁴⁸ Technically, in leadership emergence theory, shaping activities are called process items (since God's uses these items to process or shape a person). Fifty-one common process items have been identified, defined, described and illustrated in leadership emergence theory. These were derived from comparative study of many leader's case studies. Jonah illustrates several of these. Familiarity with process items can help a leader be proactive about responding to God's shaping through them. See **Article, 6. God's Shaping Processes With Leaders.**

⁴⁹ A critical incident is a special intervention (could be a series over time) in which God gives a *major value* that will flow through the life or will give *strategic direction* to narrow the leader's life work.

⁵⁰ A macro-lesson is a high level generalization of a leadership observation (suggestion, guideline, requirement), stated as a lesson, which repeatedly occurs throughout different leadership eras, and thus has potential as a leadership absolute. See **Articles, 22. Macro Lessons—Defined; 23. Macro Lessons—List of 41 Across Six Leadership eras.**

two are:

- Ministry Task
- Obedience Check

Let me define each of these and suggest some of the purposes behind them.

Definition A ministry task is an assignment from God which primarily tests a person's faithfulness and obedience but often also allows use of ministry gifts in the context of a task which has closure, accountability, and evaluation.

Figure Jnh 17-1 depicts how a ministry task is used by God to shape a leader.



Luke 16:10 The Little/Big Principle

The one who is faithful in little things will be faithful in big things. The one who is unfaithful in little things will be unfaithful in bigger things.

Figure Jnh 17-1 Ministry Task Continuum—Luke 16:10 in Action

definition An obedience check refers to that special category of process items in which God tests personal response to revealed truth in the life of a person.

There are two kinds of patterns of response to an obedience check. Table Jnh 17-1 and Table Jnh 17-2 shows show pictorially the two patterns.

Table Jnh 17-1 Positive Testing Pattern

Stage 1. The Test	Stage 2. The Response	Stage 3. The Follow-Up
God brings the test into the life of a leader.	The leader discerns the test and positively responds to it with a God-honoring and pleasing obedient response.	God expands the leader is some way or moves the leader on to the next level of responsibility.

Table Jnh 17-2 Negative Testing Pattern

Stage 1. The Test	Stage 2. The Response	Stage 3. The Follow-Up
God brings the test into the life of a leader.	The leader either does not discern the test and fails to obey God in it or sees the challenge but does not want to obey. So the leader chooses not to obey.	God brings remedial shaping to try to correct the leader.

It is easy to see which of these patterns was Jonah's. Obviously, it was the Negative Testing Pattern. Later on in ch 3 we will see that Jonah did discern this as a test but didn't want to obey because he feared God would be merciful to the Ninevites. And later we shall see Jonah going through the positive test pattern.

So then God uses this ministry task, which was concurrently an obedience check to begin a paradigm shift in Jonah. While other prophets in the Old Testament were asked by God to preach against other countries, Jonah is the only one who was asked to physically go to the foreign country to preach the message that God gave him. In addition to this challenge, Jonah likely holds the common view of the day that God exclusively blesses Israel. The call to preach to the Ninevites required a shift in Jonah so that he would act differently from other prophets and think differently than other Israelites.

The Third Shaping Activity in Jonah's Life

Jonah's remedial training, stage 3 of the negative testing pattern, occurs when he disobeys and runs away looking for a ship to escape on. The second critical incident that God intended for Jonah's growth was the life crisis, which came as a result of the storm and the sailors throwing Jonah overboard.

Definition The life Crisis process item refers to those special intense situations of pressure in human situations which are life threatening and are used by God to test and teach dependence and other ancillary values.

This time of life crisis in the belly of a great fish forced Jonah to reflect on his near death experience, his relationship with God and his disobedience to the call to preach in Assyria. The poem in Jonah 2:1-9 described Jonah's reckoning with his immortality. He wasn't sure he was going to survive. So it makes sense that Jonah also worshipped God for being a rescuing, merciful, and holy God. The prophet recognized God's providence in sending a fish to rescue him and His sovereignty over all that He created. Finally, there is indication in the poem that Jonah recommits himself to God. He makes a fox-hole⁵¹ committal to God. He vows to follow through on what he has promised. Jonah emerges from the belly of the fish with greater conviction about his call and deeper gratitude for God.

The Fourth Shaping Activity—Obedience Check, Passed

The next critical incident involved in the shaping of Jonah was God's second commissioning of the prophet. Having secured Jonah's attention during his isolation processing, the Lord states his intentions a second time that he wants Jonah to "go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

Jonah responds positively this time to God's call on his life. This illustrates the Positive Obedience Pattern. The third stage results of the pattern have an unusual expansion and one Jonah did not want. He has almost instant success to his preaching. The Ninevites repent and God shows them mercy. Jonah has shown greater obedience this second time around but, as we will discover later in the book, his obedience comes with some reluctance. This repeated call sets the stage for the reflection that will bring the paradigm shift that is happening for Jonah regarding how he views the Assyrians. This critical incident demonstrates God's commitment to and patience in developing leaders.

⁵¹ So called because in war situations where a soldier feels death is imminent he/she often calls on God to get them out of the situation with some sort of vow or promise. Usually the promise or vow is forgotten. The question is, "Will Jonah follow through?" And we see that he does.

A Final Shaping Time

Jonah has gone outside the city and is sitting alone waiting to see if God is going to bring judgment or not. This time of reflection along is an illustration of a process item known as isolation.

Definition Isolation processing⁵² refers to the setting aside of a leader from normal ministry involvement in its natural context usually for an extended time involving reflective thinking so as to experience God in a new or deeper way.

In Jonah's case it was not an extended time but concluded a long time of reflection concerning this whole ministry task to preach to the Ninevites.

This critical incident in the ministry of Jonah involved a turning point—the birth and death of the plant that shaded him from the sun. It was used by God to teach an important point. God prepared a plant to protect Jonah from the sun and subsequently prepared a worm to damage the plant. The creation of the plant brought joy to Jonah while the destruction of the plant incensed him. God used the creation and destruction of the plant as an object lesson relating to the creation and destruction of the Ninevites. The creation of the Ninevites brought joy to God while the possibility of Nineveh's destruction was a concern to God. God prefers to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness to his creation and for this reason he was eager to relent from destroying the Ninevites once they repented of their wickedness. The creation and destruction of the plant is crucial in advancing the paradigm shift that Jonah goes through to embrace God's perspective toward non-Jewish nations. It is this turning point that makes the difference in the paradigm shift Jonah goes through.

Definition A paradigm shift⁵³ is a process item, which refers to God's use of an incident or series of incidents to impress upon the leader a major new perspective (for use in ministry, for viewing things, etc.)

It is clear that Jonah went through this shift since we have the book telling about this. The book itself reflecting Jonah's negative experience and the positive experience of the non-Israelites is itself evidence that Jonah got God's perspective on this. One of the major leadership observations we have learned from comparative study of leaders lives is this,

The difference between leaders and followers is perspective. The difference between leaders and more effective leaders is better perspective.

Jonah, after the paradigm shift, is a much more effective leader. He has God's view concerning the world outside of Israel. Paradigm shifts are the major way that God breaks through a leader's worldview to give new perspective.

Some General Observations Drawn From Jonah

In addition to our discussion about shaping in particular, there are also some other observations worth noting:

1. God processes individuals so that they can learn about Him. This was certainly Jonah's experience.

⁵² See Article, 7. *Isolation Processing —Learning Deep Lessons from God.*

⁵³ See Article, 25. *Paradigms And Paradigm Shifts.*

2. Humankind can choose to go against God's purposes. Jonah willingly chose to go against God's purposes, at least initially.
3. God may after initial failure reprocess an individual toward his purposes. Jonah received remedial training concerning obedience. The second time he responded.
4. Crises experiences are God's call to know him deeply and to pursue His purposes. Jonah went deep (no pun intended) with God in his crisis experience. And it took for him. He did follow through on his vow.
5. Fasting is a sign of serious intent before God and can be a means of intensifying prayer effort. The Ninevites certainly were serious about repenting.
6. God's guidance is clear guidance. Jonah experienced God's sovereign guidance. Looking back Jonah could say, God's guidance is clear guidance.⁵⁴ Notice, God
 - a. can use normal human means (lots)
 - b. can use circumstances (the boat is ready)
 - c. can use nature (the storm, the fish, the vine, the hot desert wind)
 - d. can speak to us (directly as he did with Jonah when He explained about the destruction of the shade and His love for all peoples and creatures).

Conclusion

God shapes leaders' lives and ministry through critical incidents. This was true for Jonah and it is true today. Awareness about shaping processes and critical incidents allows a leader to participate more fully with God during the development process. Like Jonah, most leaders will face all four processes that Jonah went through. All leaders will go through paradigm shifts in order to align with God's attitudes and perspectives. The good news is that God is committed to the development of leaders. Leaders exhibit commitment to development when they submit to and learn from God's shaping activity in their lives.

⁵⁴ See **Article**, 16. *Jonah, Sovereign Guidance*.