

Look At A Book: Jonah

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I hope what you see before we leave here tonight is that the book of Jonah is about so much more than a story of a man named Jonah and a big fish. Jonah is a book about how awesome God is and holds some great truths for you and me to apply to our lives today. Jonah is a minor prophet book (like Obadiah was for us last week). This, of course, refers to its length of text and not to its importance. The author of the book is not mentioned, however, most believe it to be Jonah himself, Jonah son of Amittai. Just as the author is not known, the date this book was written is not known for sure either. It is written in the setting of 8th century BC, and the approximate date it was penned is somewhere between 785-760 BC. Jonah is mentioned a few times throughout scripture. Probably most notably in Matthew 12:40 where Jesus says: *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

There are 4 chapters to this book, and each one is set in a different setting/location. Chapter one takes place mostly at sea; chapter two takes us inside the belly of the great fish; chapter three is in Nineveh (the then-capital of the Assyrian empire); and chapter four is set just outside of Nineveh.

Our goal tonight is to focus on God being the star of this book. My favorite quote regarding the importance of this book comes from G. Campbell Morgan who observed, “Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.”

God reveals His greatness time and time again throughout this book. Let’s look at those together. Take your Bibles and let’s begin reading in Jonah chapter 1 verse 1.

Jonah 1:1-3

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” 3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

So here we have God coming straight to Jonah and giving him His word. Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh to tell the wicked people living there of God. Jonah knew about the town of Nineveh and knew that it was a powerful city. He grew up hating the Assyrians. He did not want to go there. Why was God sending him there?

Our great God is sending Jonah to talk to the terrible Assyrians. One man is sent in hopes of turning around an entire city.

Jonah just like Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah before him did not want anything to do with the call God had on their lives. The difference being the others did not feel adequate or worthy to carry out the task and Jonah just wanted to get away and have nothing to do with God's call. So there we read at the beginning of verse 3 that Jonah rose up to flee to Joppa and board a boat to Tarshish. He heard God's call, he knew what was expected of him, and his first reaction was to flee--not only to flee but also to go to Tarshish. Geographically for the time, Tarshish was about as far away from Nineveh as he could get. Traveling to Nineveh would have required him to head eastward over land. Instead, he headed south and west to the coastal city of Joppa.

As we continue on in verse three, we see what we already inferred to be true. The reason that Jonah is running is to flee from the presence of the Lord. Jonah begins running. He sees the presence of God like a cell phone service that sooner or later you can lose. To him, there must be a spot in Tarshish where God cannot find him. You and I are like that, too, aren't we? Maybe God is calling us to do something, or maybe we are convicted of a sin or something we are doing that we know is not right. Instead of facing the challenge or the problem head-on, we begin to flee from our great God. We begin looking for that place where God is not and we will not feel like He is constantly breathing down our neck. When we get uncomfortable our first instinct is to run. This is exactly what Jonah did.

To an extent Jonah's plan was working perfectly. He was able to find a boat going to Tarshish and pay for his journey.

As the journey begins, verse 4 tells us that a storm also begins. It throws the sailors from side to side and the boat is about to break. Then in Jonah 1 verse 5 the sailors were so afraid that "every man cried to his own god." They began throwing cargo over the side to lighten the load. All the while our main man Jonah, who has devised the most brilliant plan to get away from God, is where? Fast asleep. The rocking of the boat from the storm has caused Jonah to blissfully fall asleep not knowing the trouble he is causing.

The captain comes to Jonah, awakens him, and asks for him to cry out to his God. The captain and sailors have cried out to all others--why not try Jonah's God. Can you imagine what Jonah must have been thinking in that moment? When he is woken up and told to call out to the God he is fleeing from. He is practically forced to speak to the same God that he is running from--the God who disrupted his life a few verses earlier with the call to go to Nineveh is brought to the forefront again, and Jonah is forced to have a face-to-face conversation. Talk about a personal predicament. The end of verse nine after the sailors have already cast lots to see who is to blame for this situation. God forces Jonah to out himself. He is forced to say this is who I am and what I believe. He says,

"I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."

The sailors knew then that Jonah was the reason for the storm. They ask, "How could you do this to us?" Then, in verse 11:

So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

They said you are the reason for this problem, you fix it. What should we do?

Vs. 12, 13

12 *He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."*

13 *However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.*

The sailors get to the point that they do not know what to do. They asked Jonah, and he told them to throw him overboard. They thought surely that is not the answer; we will just take him back. We will drop him off and all of this will be ok. The harder they rowed to shore the bigger the storm became. I see them finally looking back at Jonah and saying, you know what maybe you are right, you have to go.

Vs. 14 Finds the sailors praying to the Lord of Jonah before they throw him overboard. They see the power of Jonah's God as they begin to pray. Once he is thrown overboard, the storm begins to calm.

Then, read what the sailors do in *vs. 16*. They made vows to God. These men started their journey from Joppa to Tarshish with no idea who this man Jonah was or what god he believed in. By the time they see the power of the God who rules the wind and the waves, they are drawn to Him. You see, the sea here holds two roles. It is an instrument of God's wrath against Jonah's rebellion, but it is also mean of revealing the awesome power of God to the Gentile sailors.

I know you all are on the edge of your seat since I stopped at such a critical point in our story and are wondering what happened to our runaway friend Jonah. We stopped with him being thrown in the water and the sea calming. I will not drag you out any further; read with me in verse 17

I do not know about you, but to me, verse 17 brings more questions than answers. I understand the easiest and ultimate answer is that he was inside the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. But what kind of fish was it? What did it smell like? What did it feel like? The final logical question is, what did he do?

Much of that part is answered in the first 3 words of chapter 2.

Then Jonah prayed

So we have at the beginning God giving Jonah a mission (one that he did not like, so he ran from God). Before he knew it, the captain of the boat was forcing him to call out to God, and then God puts him in a place where he has nothing left to do than to pray to Him.

Jonah 2:5-6

*5 "Water encompassed me to the point of death.
me,*

f]The depth deep [

W eeds w ere w rapped around m y head.

*6 "I descended to the roots of the mountains.
forever,*

w the earth with its bars

tBe p to have brought up m y life from

It is here where Jonah realizes how foolish he was to run from God. He grasps what we have already seen many times over of the greatness of God.

We then come to chapter 2 verses 10. Every elementary boy's favorite verse.

Jonah 2:10

Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

Beginning in chapter 3, we read the exact parallel of what we read in verse 1 of chapter one. God gives Jonah a proclamation to go to the city of Nineveh. Without hesitation, Jonah obeyed our powerful God and went.

Jonah 3:4-5

*4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said,
"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Jonah was finally faithful to God, and verse 5 tells us that the people of Nineveh believed. The Ninevites not only believed in a great God, but also they knew of how great God could be. They put on sackcloth-- not only on themselves, but also on their animals. The king of Nineveh led by example in hopes of saving his people. The sackcloth allowed the people to express their grief in a tangible way for all to see--including God.

Then we come to verse 10.

Jonah 3:10

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Talk about a big God. God had said that any nation on which He had pronounced judgment would be saved if it repented. God forgave Nineveh, just as He had forgiven Jonah. The purpose of God's judgment is correction, not revenge. He is always ready to show compassion to anyone willing to seek Him.

God had mercy on the people of Nineveh. God showed His power through how He was able to control His wrath through grace. The people turned to God, and I love the end of verse 10 "And He did not do it".

Now, this is where we think the book of Jonah should end. And the book would be a lot easier if it did end here. But it doesn't. In fact, **we have not yet reached the main point of the book.** Let's pick up the storyline in the first verse of chapter 4.

Jonah 4:1-5

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." 4 The Lord said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

This is where we become even more confused about this man named Jonah. Jonah himself was a recipient of God's mercy, and yet he complains about the mercy that the Lord has dispensed to the Assyrians. Jonah thought that the salvation He has should not be freely given to the wicked pagans of Nineveh. Oh how quickly Jonah has forgotten how we arrived there. We are this way too aren't we? Judging others we think are less than ourselves. Jonah said, "Look at me, I am a messenger of God. I had to be thrown off a ship and live inside a whale, but I did what God asked me to do. Those terrible people over there, those people of Nineveh have wanted nothing to do with God. But now, now they turn to him?"

So after Jonah complains about it what does he do? Well it says he went out east of the city found a good place to sit and wanted to see what God was going to do. He wanted a front row seat for whatever was going to happen.

The great God who appointed a storm to get Jonah's attention, and a great fish to swallow Jonah and change his course, then appointed a plant to grow beside Jonah and give him shade from the heat. Then God appointed a worm to eat the plant. And the plant withered and died. God then appointed the sun and the wind to beat down on Jonah.

Then again, just as God had Jonah cornered in the belly of the great fish God once again is forced to bring Jonah to the place where he is on death's door trying to get the message to him.

Jonah 4:9-11

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." 10 Then 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. 11 Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

God spared the sailors when they pleaded for mercy. God saved Jonah when he prayed from inside the fish. God saved the people of Nineveh when they responded to Jonah's preaching. Our great God answers the prayers of those who call upon Him. God will always work His will, and He desires that all come to Him, trust in Him, and be saved. We can be saved if we heed God's warnings to us through His word. If we respond in obedience, God will be gracious, and we will receive His mercy, just like Nineveh.

God is the one presented on the pages of this book as great in compassion and power.

It is God who is the most important character. He is the one who affects salvation, and He is the one who enables deliverance. Neither Jonah nor the fish had control. It was God and God alone.

The next time you hear someone mention the story of Jonah. Do not let your mind think about the great fish without thinking about our great God.