

Route 66

Jonah: Unwilling to Warn

Part 32 – March 21, 2010

Jonah is the one “celebrity” among the Minor Prophets. No other prophet was more reluctant to fulfill his mission. No other prophet was more successful in his assignment. No other prophet was more infuriated by his own success!



The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai ... - *Jonah 1:1 NIV*

Some theologians argue that Jonah was written to be read as a *parable*. Others firmly believe that it's a historical record. However, both sides agree that *Jonah* was a very *real* person.

[Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant **Jonah son of Amittai**, the prophet from Gath Hopher. - *2 Kings 14:25 NIV*

From this obscure verse we know that he was a respected prophet in Israel (the northern kingdom); he lived in a small village near Nazareth; and he served King Jeroboam II (upper 700s^{BC}). This makes Jonah a contemporary of Hosea (who married Gomer) and Amos (“Sin some more!”). And all three ministered in Israel.

The word of the Lord that came to Jonah was this:

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. - *Jonah 1:2 NIV*



Nineveh from “Wonders of the Past” 1920

Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria, one of the most vicious empires ever to exist. This was Israel's biggest, scariest oppressor. Jonah had most likely prayed for God's protection and deliverance from it, and prophesied ruin and destruction against it on many occasions. I've shown you their “artwork” of the Jews being filleted alive!

And God calls Jonah to personally go there and warn them. This would be like asking Jonah to walk the streets of Berlin in 1944 and shout warnings to the Nazi's of their impending doom. It can *only* go poorly - in one of two ways: They can reject his message ... and have fun torturing him. Or, they can receive it, repent, and prosper and remain strong. So, Jonah does what any logical, rational person might do:

... Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. - *Jonah 1:3 NIV*



Jonah lived on that dot. God asked him to go right. And so he decided to go left. Tarshish was on the edge of the known world (south-west Spain). He couldn't get further away if he wanted to! In fact, if he could continue west, the next stop would be Washington DC!

There are two motives behind Jonah's insubordination. And they are the same two sins behind much of *our* rebellion against God. Fear and hatred fueled Jonah's disobedience.

Sometimes we justify a little cheating or lying because we fear the very real cost that comes with honesty and integrity. And we rationalize not sharing our faith, or asking our friends and coworkers about theirs, for fear of what they might think. And then there's *hatred*. Is there anyone who's harmed, hurt, or injured you, and you'd rather see 'em burn than turn? Well, get your ticket to Tarshish and expect some rough water!

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. - *Jonah 1:4 NIV*

The pagan sailors cried out to their gods. They threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. The captain went below deck, woke up Jonah, and told him to start praying to his god! And then they cast lots to find out who was responsible. Lots were something like dice, with black and white sides. Two blacks is a "no", two whites is a "yes". "Is it one of the sailors? No!" "Is it a man? Yes!" "Is it *him*?"

... and the lot fell on Jonah. - *Jonah 1:7 NIV*

And the sea was getting rougher and the ship was threatening to break apart. And then the conversation went like this: "Why have the lots fallen to you?!" "I'm running away from my God." "Does your god have anything to do with the sea?!" "He kind of made it ... and He controls it." "He *seems* to be angry!"

And Jonah said the only way to calm the storm was to throw him overboard. But the sailors try in vain to row back to the land. Do you see the lesson the Lord is trying to teach Jonah? These pagan sailors show more compassion to a lone stranger (when their *own lives* are at stake) than Jonah did for a whole nation!

The sea grows wilder than before, and they finally give in, pray for forgiveness, throw Jonah overboard, and make vows to his God. And Jonah sinks beneath the waves ... down ... down ... down.

But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. - *Jonah 1:17 NIV*



People have a real problem with this. “You *can’t* live inside a fish for three days!” But, where’s it say he *lived* inside the fish?

Personally, I think it’d only require a *minor miracle* to keep him in a pocket of air, or to keep the fish at the surface. But, some believe that Jonah drowned *before* he was swallowed.

Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. ... The earth with its bars was around me forever, but You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. - *Jonah 2:5-6 NAS*

Chapter two says, “from inside the fish Jonah prayed ...”; but, it also says, “From the depths of the grave I called for help ...” Either way, I’m okay with it. But if he did drown, then the real miracle occurred when God resurrected him. And if *that’s* true, then it’s quite a parallel to Jesus’ death and resurrection!

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. - *Matthew 12:40 NIV*

And just as Jesus was raised from the dead to offer redemption, even to His enemies, Jonah was raised up from his watery grave to offer it to his: the Ninevites!

And even as he’s slowly being digested, Jonah begins to realize that God is *saving* him. And suddenly God’s grace overwhelms him, and he reconfirms his faith while still *inside* the fish! He counted his blessings *while* he was being consumed. And the Lord used the very thing that was consuming him and destroying him, to guide him back into God’s grace, and to reestablish their relationship, and to get him back on track.

And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. - *Jonah 2:10 NIV*



Imagine how joyful and how thankful he must have been - laying there on the beach and praising God, covered in fish vomit! He would’ve been euphoric, *ecstatic* ... ‘cause let’s face it, there’s only one of two ways he’s coming out of that fish! And what he must have realized then and there was that the safest place to be is in the center of God’s will



So, when the word of the Lord came to Jonah a 2nd time to go to Nineveh and proclaim God’s message, he didn’t hesitate. Jonah traveled 1000 miles to get to Nineveh. Today, Nineveh is encompassed by Mosul, Iraq’s 2nd largest city. The remains of its gates and 7.5 miles of walls (53’ high x 49’ thick) still surround the ancient ruins from Jonah’s day.

Reconstructed Nineveh city gate

At this point in history, Nineveh had suffered military defeats, weakened power, internal revolts, and a persistent drought. And the solar eclipse of 763^{BC} probably really unnerved them. And these pagans do what the Israelites rarely did; they repent! It took three days to walk the ancient city. However ...

On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. - *Jonah 3:4-5 NIV*

Is it just me, or does *everyone* in this story obey God except Jonah?! The wind and the sea obey. The pagan sailors obey. The giant fish obeys. Even the cruelest empire in the world obeys. This is a giant object lesson for Israel. Nineveh represents the Gentiles, and Jonah represents the chosen, who were unwilling to fulfill their role in sharing God's grace with the world.

When the news reaches the king of Nineveh, he puts on sackcloth and sits in the dust as an expression of remorse. And then he decrees that every man *and animal* must fast and wear sackcloth.

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. - *Jonah 3:7b-8 NIV*

Now *that's* repentance!

And God has compassion on them. And Jonah reveals his true colors:

That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." - *Jonah 3:10-4:3 NIV*

Jonah is a racist, a hyper-nationalist! Although he had repented of his actions, he hadn't repented of his attitude. He's like the older brother in the Prodigal Son. When he hears about the party being thrown because of his younger brother's repentance he refuses to go in and sits outside and sulks. So, Jonah sits outside the city of Nineveh, under a shade plant, for forty days hoping that God will still destroy it.

But instead of destroying Nineveh, the Lord destroys his plant!

God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head ...
- *Jonah 4:7-8 NIV*

And Jonah gets really upset about this plant!

And the Lord points out that Jonah pities a vine (that he didn't even plant), and yet he wants God to withhold pity on a people He created, who've been destroyed by a "worm" (named Satan). "Jonah, I had mercy on you in spite of your guilt. Now, look past your fear and anger, and see my children."

And then He reminds Jonah that Nineveh has more than 120,000 who "can't tell their right hand from their left" (which is likely a reference to the innocent children).

Then he adds: "and many cattle as well". And Jonah probably looked out at the fields and saw all the cows grazing in their sackcloth muumuus ... and he had to admit that *that* was cute!

And the book finishes with the Lord asking ...

Should I not be concerned about that great city? - *Jonah 4:11b NIV*

And we don't get to know *Jonah's* answer. That's because the question is really intended for Israel ... and *us*.

The mercy of God is *not* the main point of this book. The main point is the same point that Jesus made in Luke 6:36:

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. - *Luke 6:36 NIV*

Our assignment is to extend the grace and mercy that we've received, to those who've hurt us, and to forgive them, and to pray for them, and to reconcile with them when possible. It's either that or face the storm!