

Jonah September 24, 2023

*“Not Just a Fishy Story”*

This week, we come to Jonah's book, a book not of prophecy but of God's love and the foolishness of humanity. The name Jonah means “dove,” conveying the idea of peace and tranquility. The narrative of Jonah is pitifully obscured by a fish story, not a whale, which so many people have swallowed hook, line, and sinker. I find that the story has undergone much controversy because of its literal interpretation to gain the world's attention. How was it possible for a fish to swallow a man? The book is considered a part of Israelite history and never intended to be read as a fable, for the book contains a great message of truth: “The love and mercy of God is broader than the measure of man's mind.”

Ultimately, the story is of a prophet who flees from his God. Right from verse one, we see why God calls Jonah: To preach against the wickedness of Nineveh. God has a lost world on his mind in the hot pursuit of lost people of all ages who need to be saved from sin. But Jonah, Weirdly, a prophet, the man of God, rebels and holds anger against his own God. Why? Because Jonah despises the Assyrians of Nineveh for their wicked ways, too evil for God's amazing saving grace.

It's not hard to see that the world is full of suspicious people who say they are people of God yet try everything possible to run away from God, even attempting to avoid God and his Word altogether, not to feel guilty about how they live. Secondly, the world has forgotten how to repent. Others avoid God by filling their lives with the pursuit of power and success, and sometimes, we, as people of faith, run from God if he calls upon us to do something we do not want to do. Incredibly, we can become so self-righteous that we believe some people are too bad or evil to seek God's love and mercy. The question is: do lost people matter to us? Do we care about God's will or follow ours? The account of Jonah is not a “whale of a fish story” but a story of spiritual insight into the unbounded mercy of the Creator God. Today, we will find out that Jonah was destined to learn many valuable lessons about God, and so do we: God's amazing grace is always present. Let us pause and pray.

**Lord, answer us when we call to you. Give us relief from distress; have mercy on us and hear our prayer. Lord, like David, we cry out to you as our authority and the author of true mercy. Thank you for being a God of compassion and love. Life is hard enough without constantly being afraid of a God who is out for vengeance. Please help us see your will when you do not lift the consequences of our actions. Mercy is a gift. Please help us never forget to mirror to others the compassion you show us. In this, we pray, Amen.**

Published in June of 2021, a story emerged in the Boston News of a Massachusetts man, Michael Packard, who, as a Cape Cod commercial lobster diver, was briefly swallowed by a humpback whale off the coast of Cape Cod. In recounting the painful moment, he realized that he was in the closed mouth of one of the world's most enormous creatures. Experts said the encounter was rare. Packard described what it's like inside a whale, saying he didn't know if he would be swallowed or suffocated as he thought about his sons, wife, mother, and family. Packard says, I knew this was a massive creature, and then suddenly, I saw the light, felt the whale shaking its head, and was spit out. Taken to the hospital, Packard had at least one broken leg. Packard later found himself on a segment of 60 Minutes in July 2021. Similar reports of fish swallowing people date back to the 17 and 1800s.

Regardless of whether you believe the story of Jonah and the fish is factual, we read in the Gospel of Matthew 12:39-41 where Jesus referred to the experience of Jonah as a historical illustration of his literal resurrection, thus reinforcing the truthfulness of this narrative. If you can get by the opening of the Bible in Genesis 1:1 and believe the Bible is true, then you will agree with me that the story is factual. Listen to what Jesus had to say in Matthew 12:40. “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.”

Jonah is the only minor prophet with whom Jesus compares himself. But as history progresses, the book of Jonah becomes the account of an eccentric visionary who shows his utter unfitness for his office by running away from God’s assignment. Unlike the call of the Lord to other prophets, such as the young Isaiah who replied, “Here I am, Lord, send me,” Jonah had something other than a deep desire to comply with God’s call to go to Nineveh and present a message of judgment and mercy. Instead, his ingrained prejudices and hostilities toward the Ninevites swept over him. Struggling between whose side God was on, Jonah wanted God to crush his enemies, not save them.

In those days, Nineveh was a great city of Assyrians of modern-day Iraq located on the Tigris River. At its peak, Nineveh’s city walls stretched to a circumference of seven to eight miles, making it a vast city by ancient standards. It was a powerful Assyrian empire notorious for its wickedness and sin. They were mean and nasty, known as cruel warriors who tortured their captors, tearing off the limbs and hands of their victims. They would flay victims alive and make great piles of skulls at the city gates of those cities they conquered. Here is where Jonah and God struggled with a conflict of wills.

In the book of Nahum 3:1,3, God refers to Nineveh as the “bloody city, full of lies and robbery.” Ultimately, Jonah runs from his office as a prophet of God. A word has come to him that he cannot deliver, and he flees as a servant of his Lord. We know from the text that Jonah is a believer in his confession of faith but a fleeing believer who does not like the task to which he has been called. By now, you are probably asking, what’s this all about? What did God ask of Jonah that was so frightening? God asks Jonah to send a message of mercy, to preach a notice of eight words: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” In Jonah’s anger, he disobeys God for loving his enemies. He eventually chews out God because the opposite was what Jonah wanted and God’s will intended to do. God was not on Jonah’s side but on Nineveh’s.

The story in Chapter One moves on to when Jonah runs away from the Lord and stows away with pagan sailors on a boat headed to Tarshish, two thousand miles west of Nineveh of what we now know as Spain. We discover from the story the pagan sailors who find Jonah have soft and repentant hearts and turn to God in humble repentance. Amid a raging sea that God sent, threatening to break the ship apart, they draw lots to see who is to blame. Jonah draws the short straw, so they interrogate Jonah for the raging sea. Jonah says, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will calm. So, the sailors toss him overboard amid the waters coming over the boat’s edge. Then, what happens? The sea subsides, and God sends a fish to swallow Jonah. In return, the sailors thank God for his mercy for calming the sea. For three days and nights, Jonah cried out to the Lord, praying for deliverance, and so God spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah. I know it’s a bizarre story, but one that we should believe. I wonder how far the fish had to projectile Jonah to dry land. It must have been a hard landing!

There is a remarkable truth discovered in Jonah: you can run, but you cannot hide from the Lord. Why? Three reasons. Even though we may attempt to resist his plan, God has a plan for our life. Jonah had a heart problem, and he was a worshipping Jew. History reveals that Nineveh was immoral and wicked. Jonah worshipped the one true God. The Ninevites worshipped false gods. Jonah loved his native land of Israel but hated and feared the evil Assyrian empire. And so, he resisted God's plan for his life, instead attempting to run from God's presence. We, too, might attempt to resist God's plan, trying to run from His presence, but I can assure you that it will cost us when we disobey the Lord. Those who hesitate or refuse to tell others about Jesus suffer from the "Jonah complex!" As hard as it might sound, we must not forget that according to God's will, no person is too evil to be saved. No one is too wicked to receive God's grace. No person is beyond the love and mercy of God.

Secondly, the hero of the book of Jonah is God, for He controls his creation. The Bible teaches that our God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present God, and in the book of Jonah, we discover that God is sovereign over His creation. He controls the wind and sea, so he controls a great fish to swallow Jonah. Next week, as Jonah pouts in chapter four, we will continue to see his sovereignty over creation. We, as Christians, might sail on the wrong boat, heading in the wrong direction, seeking to hide from the presence of God. We might find ourselves reluctant to follow the Lord. In verses five through 7, we see the sailors crying to their uncaring gods, throwing cargo overboard, and praying it would work, but God was in the way. The storm was not typical, and something supernatural caused them to conclude that some magical and mysterious God caused it: Jonah's God, yet Jonah was utterly oblivious to all the turmoil about him. That is what happens when blind eyes and dull hearts become insensitive to God's voice and others' needs. The last thing Jonah wanted to do was respond to the call of the pagan sea captain and talk to God. Meanwhile, the pagan sailors were trying to find God, but God's prophet was trying to flee from God. Yet, we see God controlling His creation to retrieve His prophet for His mission. In the same way, we can run from God, but we cannot hide.

Third, how can we escape a God without limited power or ability? He is the God of heaven who made the sea and dry land. God wants us to be truthful with others and ourselves. We see the confession of Jonah when the sailors ask Jonah a question. "Why have you done this?" I am running from the presence of the Lord, Jonah says. "What shall we do with you that the sea may calm for us?" Throw me into the sea, he says. Whatever the reason, perhaps God's hard-hearted prophet was suffering for his sin, and so he spoke the truth so God could show mercy and save the pagan sailors. Jonah has come face to face with his sin and its consequences.

We should see how the book of Jonah relates to us. God is persistent in our life, described as the "Hound of Heaven who will not let us go." Why? God wants us to see His power. Try as we might, we cannot physically or spiritually save ourselves when we come up against the God of heaven and earth. God wants us to give Him praise. Verse 16 records the amazing conversion of the pagan sailors in their response. They feared the Lord in reverence, awe, and worship. The text reads, "They feared the Lord with great fear." In submissive wonder, they offered a sacrifice and took vows. Was it genuine? According to Jesus in Matthew 12:31, yes. "The men of Nineveh will rise in judgment with this generation and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." Remember this: the past is always a point of comparison for the future.

Although indifferent to God's will, Jonah was a religious person intimately and rightly related to the true God; on the other hand, the sailors were Gentiles with no history of Jehovah God. They were pagans. Jonah became spiritually insensitive, going in the wrong direction, while the mariners became spiritually sensitive before God despite little knowledge of Him. Secondly, God is compassionate and will not turn his face on you. Although Jonah had no will of compassion toward Nineveh, the sailors were incredibly compassionate toward Jonah, yet Jonah was rebellious and, therefore, disciplined but not destroyed. Third, repentance brings joy and healing, a change of heart and mind that brings us closer to God. Ultimately, the sailors were responsive and brought to conversion, worship, and commitment because they had a face-to-face encounter with the living God. Here is the question of the day. Are you running from God? Has God revealed to you what His will is for your life, and yet you have said, "No?"

In closing, I can readily identify with Jonah. God worked similarly in my life. I think it was around age 10 when I came to Christ and heard God call me. I clearly remember the day. From that day, and although a believer, I ran from God for many years. I was not interested in what He wanted to do in my life, nor did I feel strong enough to follow His ways. For many years, I had no concern for what His plan might be for me. God, however, did not give up on Gary. He worked providentially and persistently to get my attention and to turn me in the right direction. Although I continually heard his voice speaking, he broke me for good following my cancer diagnosis and ultimate surgery. But in and through it all, a God of grace, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness was giving His child, me, another chance. I discovered that, like Jonah, you can run but can't hide from God. I also learned that when God finds you, you will ask yourself, "Why did I ever run from God in the first place?" It costs far more to run from God than to run with God. Are you running from God today? If so, why not stop, turn around, and go back home where you belong? Amen.