

God's Message to Us in Jonah

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Introduction

This afternoon, we are continuing our sermon series on God's Message to us in Every Book of the Bible.

- I want to remind you as we make our way through the Old Testament that the Scriptures are unique in that the Holy Spirit revealed them not only for the people who were alive when each book was written, but also for all who live after them.
- We have several places in the New Testament where this is expressly declared...
 - In Rom 15:4 it says: **For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.**
 - Likewise after giving examples of judgments that fell on Israel, 1 Cor 10:11 says: **Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**
 - And in Romans 4:23-24 we are told that when it was written way back in Genesis that righteousness was imputed to Abraham through faith, it was written for our benefit also: **Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead...**
- The Bible is not just a history book.
 - It is the oracles of God written to enlighten every generation.
 - That is why those who believe in the true God devote so much attention to the scriptures—the scriptures guide us not only in how we are to live, but in what we are to believe about God and about His salvation.
 - We find the word to be living and powerful, and we find that it makes us wise to salvation and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

Today we are looking at God's message to us in Jonah.

- We read two passages from the New Testament in our New Testament scripture reading in which Jesus proclaims that Jonah is a sign for His (Jesus's) generation.
 - Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32.
 - In both passages, Jesus is calling them a wicked and adulterous generation that is seeking a sign to believe (even though He had been doing many miracles among them),
 - And He tells them that the sign they will be given is the sign of Jonah.
 - In Matthew 12:40, He says: **For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man** [that is the title He uses to refer to Himself] **be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**
 - And in both Matthew and Luke, He says that: (Mt 12:41, Luke 11:32) **The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.**
 - We will see how this was a sign to them later...

But let me give you a bit of background about Jonah.

- Jonah lived and prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel, who reigned from 793 BC to 753 BC.
 - We know that Jonah lived then because he is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as Jonah the son of Amitai who prophesied that Israel would prosper during the reign of Jeroboam II—which they did.
- In the book of Jonah, Jonah is commanded to go to Nineveh, the capital of the wicked and cruel Assyrian empire.
 - Jonah does not want to go, not so much because of fear of them, but because he hates them and does not want to warn them lest they repent.
 - God ends up teaching Jonah, and us, a number of lessons, and gives a sign to His people in Jonah that Jesus speaks of and that still speaks volumes to us today.

Let's look at three lessons we can draw from the book of Jonah.

- First, the events recorded in Jonah are a remarkable example of prophetic foreshadowing in history.
- Second, Jonah is a sign to us that people outside the church often fear God more than we do.
- Third, Jonah teaches us about compassion—in a number of ways.

So let's get going...

I. Jonah is a remarkable example of prophetic foreshadowing.

A. The book opens with Jonah being called to preach to Nineveh:

- Jonah 1:1-2: **Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amitai, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”**
1. God sending a prophet to the Gentiles was pretty much unheard of in the OT, but He was doing it to make a point.
 - God often told Israel that He was going to judge their enemies...
 - but rarely told the heathen nations that He was going to judge them.
 - Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example of the normal way that God dealt with the nations He was about to judge in the Old Testament.
 - When He was about destroy Sodom, He told Abraham, but He did not tell Sodom.
 - He also told Lot and his family.
 - Lot was the only man in Sodom who feared the LORD, and hearing of the judgment, he was able to escape, but the rest of the people were not warned because the time had come for judgment to fall on them.

2. Understand, as Jonah did, that God was showing great mercy to the Assyrians by telling them that they would be judged for their wickedness.

- It provided them with a chance to repent and to cry out to Him for mercy.
 - Jonah understood this, and it was for this reason that he refused to go.
 - Jonah 1:3 tells us that he boarded a ship to Tarshish instead.
 - Why should this wicked nation that had caused so much harm to his people and to the world to be warned of God's judgment?

- We know that this is what Jonah thought because he tells God that this is the reason he tried to run off to Tarshish when God called him to go to Nineveh.
 - Jonah 4:1-2 tells us how he responded when he saw Nineveh repent: **But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. 2 So he prayed to the LORD, and said, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”**
 - It wasn't so much that Jonah was afraid.
 - It was that he felt these men of Nineveh had no right to be warned.
3. And then when Jonah does finally go and preach to them, to our amazement they repent.
- All Jonah did was tell them that God would overthrow their city in forty days because of their wickedness, and they repent.
 - Look at Jonah 3:3-9 and you can see it: **So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey *in extent*. 4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. 6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?”**
 - What a wonderful response—but not to Jonah.
 - As we already saw, he was angry that God was merciful to them because he knew that they deserved to be judged.

TRANS> Does this sound familiar?

- B. This is exactly what happened when Jesus commanded the gospel to be taken to the Gentiles.
1. When the Gentiles heard the gospel, they received it with joy and many of the Jews—even the ones that believed—were angry about this.
 - Why should the Gentiles receive mercy when Christ had been sent to Israel?
 - The Gentiles were wicked idol worshippers, so how could they receive mercy when many of Israelites had not yet repented?
 2. Jonah's history prophetically foreshadows both the response of the Gentiles and of the Jews.
 - What happened in history here, as recorded in Jonah, is setting a pattern for us of what would happen when the Messiah came.
 - a. God had made it very clear from the start that it was His plan to bless all the nations.

- When He first called Abraham, He declared that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed.
 - And the LORD had reminded His people of this, for example, in the prophecies He gave concerning David and how that nations would come.
 - Israel was preserved by God to bring the Messiah into the world so that Israel as well as all the nations of the earth might be blessed through His saving work.
 - Even John the Baptist proclaimed Him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and after Jesus rose He told His disciples to preach the gospel to all nations.
 - b. And the prophecies had foretold that the Gentiles would respond to the gospel.
 - So when you have God calling Jonah to go to the Gentiles and preach, and then you have them repenting...this foreshadowing...
 - It is an illustration of what the Gentiles would do when Jesus came.
 - And then you have along with this Israel rejecting the Messiah and being angered that the Gentiles should be accepted by God (or be told by the apostles of Jesus that they were).
3. Jesus makes the connection between His own generation and Jonah in the passages we read in Matthew and Luke—calling Jonah a sign to “this generation.”
- a. When Jesus made this connection, it was evident that the Jews were not repenting at the preaching of Jesus thus far.
 - But there were two things that were not at all evident and that would have been impossible for anyone to know without divine revelation.
 - 1) First, that Jesus would rise from the dead on the third day and that even when He did, the Jews would *still* not believe.
 - 2) And second, that the Gentiles *would* believe.
 - So you see, you have both the consistent prophecy from 2000 years before Christ came that the Gentiles would repent...
 - And you have the historic illustration of the Gentiles repenting and Israel being offended, to support and highlight these prophecies...
 - b. This is a prophecy that leaves unbelievers in our day without an excuse for their unbelief.
 - That God knew all along that when the Messiah came, Israel would reject Him and that pagan nations would repent and believe is supernatural.
 - Think about how remarkable it is for God to make it known 2000 years beforehand and to continue to renew the prophecy right up to the time of Jesus’ coming that people from all different nations would come to Christ.
 - And that they would come even though Israel would be a very secondary and failed nation under the dominion of Rome at that time...
 - And even though Israel’s own leaders and most of the people of Israel would not acknowledge their Messiah.
 - There is no way to predict such an outcome—and no way for prophets over a 1500 year period to continue to predict it when everything

seemed to be going in the opposite way, humanly speaking...I mean, Jesus said this when His own people were rejecting Him.

C. We need to make use of this powerful apologetic.

1. To strengthen our own faith.

- We live in a day when our faith is under attack.
- We need all the help we can get.
- The remarkable sign of Jonah should give us confidence in the prophecies of the Bible.

2. We also need to use this powerful apologetic to challenge those who do not believe to repent and believe.

- We can show them that God foretold just what would happen when the Messiah came, and that no skeptic can adequately explain how the prophets and Jesus could know this without divine insight.

TRANS> This is a huge lesson for us from Jonah.

- But now let's move on to look at the second lesson which is related to this.

II. Jonah is a sign to us, just as it was to Israel, that we do not fear God even as much as pagans do.

A. In the New Testament, Paul explains that by going to the Gentiles with the gospel and by bringing the Gentiles into the kingdom, the LORD made Israel jealous.

1. Israel was God's covenant people and Christ was sent to them first.

- He preached to them, healed the sick, raised the dead, and was Himself raised from the dead; but they would not repent and believe.
- They showed that they did not fear God when Jesus and His apostles warned them that they would be judged for their unbelief—in that generation...
 - a prophecy that was fulfilled in 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman armies.

2. Christ was sent to them first and preached to them first, but they would not repent and believe so the Lord went out to the nations.

- And the nations did believe.
- They came to know the LORD as their Saviour, to delight in the forgiveness of sin and to be received into the kingdom of God while the Jews were cast out.
 - They received the blessing of the Holy Spirit and were adopted into the family of God while the sons of the kingdom were cast out for their unbelief.
 - Their zeal for God, their fear of God, their welcome of the gospel and their delight in God's mercy put the Jews to shame.

B. In the first chapter, there is an unfavourable comparison between Jonah and the Gentiles on the boat.

1. In the first chapter of Jonah, you have Jonah refusing to go to preach to Nineveh and boarding a boat to take him in the opposite direction... to Tarshish.

- No way would he go to those undeserving Gentiles to warn them of God's judgment, even though God called him to.
- Jonah himself, like his people, did not show a proper fear of God!

- a. Most of you know the story.
 - God sent a terrible storm—but what did the pagan Gentile idol-worshipping sailors do when the storm came?
 - They cry out to their gods while Jonah sleeps.
 - They find out that he is sleeping and urge him to call on his God too.
 - It should have been Jonah who was instructing them to pray!
 - Already you have Gentiles showing up God's own servant in Israel.
 - That is the sign of Jonah.
 - b. Do you not find the same today when you see those who serve false God's more zealous than we are?
 - It is a shameful thing!
 - The Muslims are at their prayers while we sleep.
 - The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons are out proselytising while we are watching movies.
 - The agnostics down the road are helping out their neighbours in need while we are busy with our own interests.
 - c. As soon as Jonah tells these Gentiles that he is the cause of the storm because he has disobeyed the God he serves, the true God who made heaven and earth,
 - these pagans are horrified—at the very thought that he should do such a thing to such a God!
 - If God had spoken to them, they would not have thought of going the other way!
 - Listen to how they responded (Jonah 1:10-16): **Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. 11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?” —for the sea was growing more tempestuous. 12 And 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 this great tempest is because of me.” 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, “We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You.” 15 So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.**
 - Do you see the point?
 - It is clear that these pagan men fear the LORD, as soon as they hear of Him, more than Israel did and more (even) than Jonah did!
 - They pray, they try to save Jonah, they plead for mercy, they offer sacrifices...
- But this is only the beginning of the superiority of the Gentiles' response in the first part of Jonah's story.

2. When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and preaches to the wicked Assyrians and they repent, the contrast with Israel is even more damning for Israel.
 - a. We already saw how men of Nineveh responded as recorded in Jonah 3:3-9—how they proclaimed a fast and cried out to God for mercy!
 - That is just the way we ought to respond when God calls us to repent!
 - b. And you see, this was in contrast to Israel's response at that time!
 - Elijah and Elisha had preached to them and they had not repented...
 - And now Jonah was among them and Amos and Hosea were sent to them at this time, and many others, but Israel did not repent.
 - They showed that they did not fear God like the Ninevites.
 - The Israelites knew the true God, but they continued to worship idols and to worship in ways that God had not commanded.
 - They continued to oppress the poor and to live in disobedience—even though they were God's covenant people who had the promises.

C. The sign of Jonah exposes us just as much as it exposed Israel.

1. It exposed Israel in Jonah's day, and it exposed them again in the time of Christ when the Gentiles accepted the Messiah and Israel did not.
 - Hear again the words of Jesus to His generation in Matthew 12:41-42: **The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.** ⁴² **The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.**
2. But what do we see within the church in Canada today?
 - a. We see hard hearts that will not repent.
 - But what do we see when the gospel is carried to peoples who have never heard it?
 - They repent and believe with great joy and zeal.
 - We are told that in Iraq today, where there is persecution, the pastors are unable to disciple all the new believers.
 - We are told of many in China, who, despite persecution, welcome the gospel.
 - b. We have the gospel in our land and we are turning away from it while others are receiving it with joy.
 - How wretched we are!
3. Evangelism is good for us.
 - Not only because God calls us to do it and gives us grace to do it, but also because new believers remind us how special the gospel really is.
 - When you see a new believer rejoicing in His salvation, it can alert you to how cold you are—it may even expose you as someone who has never really come to Christ, despite your profession!
 - The sign of Jonah is still powerful among us!

TRANS> But there is still more.

III. The sign of Jonah also teaches us about compassion.

- Jonah got a fresh lesson in compassion which is meant to be a lesson for us too.
- A. First of all, we have a similar thing to what we just saw—where the Gentiles have more compassion than Jonah!
1. We have already seen that Jonah was so offended that the LORD would warn these wicked Ninevites that he refused to go and preach to them...
 - And then when the LORD forced him to go, he was angry that God would forgive them.
 - He wanted to see them destroyed.
 - Before you get on too much of a high horse though, remember that the Assyrians at Nineveh were a wicked and cruel nation that had oppressed Israel and other nations.
 - They would be something like the Nazis would be to us when they were rising in power and wreaking havoc.
 2. But still, the pagan sailors show more compassion toward Jonah, even though Jonah had put them in danger by his disobedience to God, than Jonah showed toward the men at Nineveh.
 - I read to you in chapter 1 verse 13 about how the men refused to throw Jonah out and tried to row to land, risking their ship and their lives for Jonah...
 - until it was clear that the LORD would not allow it.
 - They cared more about Jonah than he did about the men of Nineveh.
 - A shameful thing when unbelievers love us more than we love them.
 - But sadly, when our faith has grown cold, it is often so.
 - Rosaria Butterfield was a Lesbian professor who became a believer.
 - She has written several excellent Christian books.
 - But in them, she mentions how the Lesbian community of which she was a part was more caring than the church.
 - It should not be that way, but sadly it often is.
 - We are to be the ones who are supposed to be known by the love we have for one another.
 - May the LORD make it to be so for us!

➤ But Jonah (and we thought him) had much more instruction about compassion than this.

B. He had the personal experience of God's compassion toward him.

1. Jonah had sinned in refusing to go to Nineveh and he was thrown into the sea.
 - But the story is told in chapter 2—a story that is very well known.
 - God had prepared a fish just for Jonah, and the fish swallowed Jonah as we are told in Jonah 1:17.
 - Then in chapter 2, we have record of the prayer of Jonah from the fish's belly.
 - In Jonah 2:2, he testifies, saying: "**I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.**"
 - He describes the belly of the fish as like a grave where he was cut off from the LORD, but that the LORD was merciful and heard his prayer.

- In Jonah 2:6, he says: “**I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.**”
 - In verse 7, he speaks of praying toward the temple—where the sacrifices were made—where the blood of the covenant was shed for sin—where Jesus was represented as the one promised for the forgiveness of sins.
2. This is just as it was with Jesus, the greater than Jonah, when He went into the belly of the earth with our sins laid upon Him.
- Like Jonah, He cried out with vehement cries and tears, and was heard.
 - As our sin-bearer, He went to the cross and was rejected, but in mercy and compassion, the Father heard Him and accepted His sacrifice for us.
 - Then He died and was buried, but rose the third day, declaring to us the good news that His sacrifice for us had been accepted.
 - He was alive because God had received it.
 - And now He commanded His disciples to go into all the world and preach repentance in His name for the remission of sins, promising that whoever believes in Him will be saved.
3. Both Jonah and Jesus came forth from the grave (as it were) preaching salvation and the forgiveness of sin.
- Jonah reluctantly took his message from God to the men of Nineveh, declaring to them that they would be overthrown in forty days, and even though Jonah did not call them to repentance, they repented and were spared from that fate.
 - Likewise, Christ joyfully took His message to the nations and all those who repented and believed found mercy.
 - God’s compassion for sinners is a marvellous thing!

TRANS> But Jonah, though he found compassion marvellous for himself, had to learn that it is marvellous for the men of Nineveh also... it is who God is and it is good.

C. Jonah’s final lesson about compassion comes in chapter 4.

1. We have already seen his complaint about God showing mercy to Nineveh.
 - He is so angry that he wants to die... Look at 4:1-3: **But it displeased Jonah exceedingly [that God had forgiven the men of Nineveh], and he became angry. 2 So he prayed to the LORD, and said, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!”**
 - It seems crazy to us that Jonah is angry at God for being compassionate when he himself has been the recipient of God’s compassion...
 - And it is a horrendous thing!
 - But remember, we have not had enemies like the Ninevites that have hurt our loved ones...
 - And not only that,
 - But in our day, we struggle in our own way with the glorious attributes of God.

- His justice is one of His most lovely attributes, but we are often offended and embarrassed by it—unable to praise God that He is a God who always punishes sin.
- And besides that, we can be pretty uncaring when it comes to our enemies and can frankly become rather indifferent about their salvation.
 - Sometimes we have so little compassion that we never even get around to telling our friends of the LORD Jesus and of His salvation.

➤ So what does the LORD do to teach Jonah (and us) about compassion?

2. He gives Jonah a lesson with a plant.

- Jonah goes up on a hill, apparently hoping to watch Nineveh get destroyed.
 - He makes a little shelter from the hot sun, but it is not nearly enough, so in His compassion, the LORD prepares a plant to provide shade—for which Jonah is very glad.
 - But then the LORD sends a worm to destroy the plant and Jonah is angered.
- The following conversation proceeds (Jonah 4:9-11): **Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”** And he said, **“It is right for me to be angry, even to death!”**¹⁰ But the LORD said, **“You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.** ¹¹ **And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”**
 - Jonah cared about his plant that grew up on its own more than he did about the 120,000 people and the animals of Nineveh that God had made.
- There is powerful application here.
 - Is it not often the case with you that you have more concern about your *things* than you do about people?
 - Praise the LORD that He is not like us!
 - If He were, He never would have left the glories of heaven to come to redeem us from our sin.
 - Delight in His compassion and live in this world with that compassion for all the people that He has made.
 - As you have received compassion, learn to have compassion.

Conclusion: The sign of Jonah is for us as God’s people.

- It is meant to wake us up—that we might believe—that we might fear God—and that we might be compassionate as He is compassionate.