

Jonah: The Man in the Mirror

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Now if you're a guest or visitor with us this morning, it is not by accident or happenstance that we're turning to the book of Jonah today. In fact, we as a family of faith are walking through the Scriptures on about a year Bible reading plan, typically a chapter, maybe two chapters a day, and in this season, we find ourselves in the last 12 books of what we know as the Old Testament, the minor prophets, not designated minor because their message is less than but because oftentimes, as we saw last week with Obadiah in 21 verses, the quantity of their message is somewhat lacking. Today we find ourselves in one of the most familiar stories in all of the Bible, the story of Jonah, four simple chapters so well-known not even that among the "Christian church community" that even a famous cartoon of days gone by had whom we know as Pinocchio imitating the story of Jonah and the whale. Oftentimes we come to this story and we know it well. We know about a rebellious prophet who was thrown overboard into the water, who was swallowed by a great fish, three days later vomited up on the seashore. The whole city of Nineveh repents and Jonah pouts.

That is the nutshell of the story but today I want to look at the story of Jonah from a unique perspective. I want to look at it as the man in the mirror and I want to ask you a very difficult favor, as we study the book of Jonah today and the person of Jonah, I want you to ask yourself: am I Jonah? Oftentimes we're good at pointing the fingers and saying, "Well, they're a Jonah, and they're a Jonah." But I want you to ask yourself today is Jonah the person in the mirror of your life, and in doing so we are going to walk through very swiftly the four chapters of the book of Jonah because it begins in chapter 1 addressing this very important issue: the price of sin.

It begins in chapter 1, verse 1,

1 Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
2 Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. 3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. 4 But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty

tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.

An incredible picture of what I would like to define today as the price of sin. Now when we talk about sin, there's a lot of definitions particularly in the New Testament. It means to miss the mark; to trespass; or to be full of iniquity, but what we see in Jonah is picturesque of what we see in the garden of Eden and what we see in our own lives, that when the Lord says yes and we say no; when God says no and we say yes; when he says right and we want to go left. Simply put, in the book of Jonah we see an amazing picture of sin is to not be where God desires us to be, to not do what the Lord calls us to do, to not say what the Lord calls us to say, or in some cases not to be quiet when the Lord calls us to be silent. So we see in Jonah one who like in the garden of Eden said, "I want to do it different than you, God."

Let's talk about the price of sin. What happens when we have the same attitude? Notice what it says in verse 3 right in the middle, "he paid the fare." It always costs, there is always a price to pay for sin. Sometimes it is financial, sometimes it is relational, sometimes it involves our own health and relations with others. Allow me to encourage you if you don't believe me, to visit one of two places at some point in your life. The first place you need to visit is a funeral home. You want to see the price of sin, go to a funeral home. You realize that I'll be put in a casket, you'll be put in a casket, everybody is put in a casket because of sin. If it were not for our original rebellion in the garden of Eden, we would never have a funeral. What did the Lord say? "In the day that you eat the forbidden fruit thereof you will surely die." Every time we attend a funeral, it is a reminder to each and every one of us the permanent price for sin.

Some years ago, as I've done hundreds if not thousands of times, I was at a visitation for a loved one, a friend that had passed away, and I'll never forget this moment. I was standing there at the casket viewing the body, the family was around, friends were around, it was the night before the service, and a friend of mine walked up, put his arm around me, tears in his eyes, he said, "Pastor, it just hurts so much." I said, "I know. I know you were dear friends." He said, "But he was just so young." I was startled for a moment and I said, "You do know he was 94 years old, don't you?" But the young man with his arm around me was 97 years old. It's interesting that even if we make it to being a centenarian, we believe it's way too young.

You see, sin always bears the price of death, but there's also a temporary aspect. One place you need to visit if you don't believe me is a funeral home, the other place you need to visit is a high school reunion. Oh yeah. I want you to think back to the first high school reunion that you attended. Maybe it was a 10 year reunion, a 20 year reunion, 30, whatever it may be, and maybe you had the same experience that I did. I'm walking through, my wife is with me, and someone passes by and says, "Hi," she goes, "Who was that?" And I said, "I don't have a clue." Not because my memory had lapsed but one thing that we fail to recognize, it doesn't make the media stories, is that sin cost us not just

permanently, it cost us temporarily as well. It costs us our health. It costs us our finances. There is a hard price to pay for a sinful life. It will age you terribly when we decide that, "God, I think I know how to do this better."

You know, there's a study that I wish somebody would do and I know nobody is going to get the funding for it and I don't have the resources to do it, I wish we would do a study in our culture of the medical cost that can be connected directly to a sinful lifestyle versus that which is not, and I would be willing to say that we would be shocked at how much of our financial and health resources go to take care of actions and behaviors and decisions that can be classified biblically as sinful. Some years ago, my family and I were a part of a Christian cooperative where we collectively gave our financial resources in the need of medical attention. It wasn't a premium like insurance is, it was actually kind of giving to one large pot, so to speak, and if you needed medical assistance, you made application, you received funds and vice versa. I'll never forget that day that I signed on the dotted line to be a part of that cooperative. The representative said, "Jeff, now I need to be clear about some things here because we have some standards and we have some things that you need to know about." I said, "Well, I understand you've got to live a Christian life." He said, "No, let me put it in black-and-white for you," he said, "If any member of your family decides to ingest a substance they should not, fall off a roof and break their leg, we're not gonna cover it." I said, "Wow, you mean business." He said, "Yes," he said, "If anybody in your family is in a car wreck and we discover that there was substance in their body that should not have been there even if it's legal, we're not covering it." Lowest premiums I've ever paid in my life. Why? Because if we could extract sin from the equation, the cost is minuscule.

Think about the stories that we see and read. Think about the stories of our own lives, the decisions and the behaviors. How often are the prices that are being paid financially when it comes to health, relationships, are due to a sinful decision and lifestyle? It's interesting, when you read the book of Jonah in verse 3 it says he went from the presence of the Lord and he went down to Joppa. You get to verse 5 when he's in the boat and it says but Jonah went down in the boat. I think one thing we need to realize when it comes to sin, it never lifts us up, it always takes us down.

Now let me be honest, the price to be a part of sin may look or sound free initially but there's always a cost on the backside. Permanently it's what you and I experience as death. Temporarily there is a myriad of aspects that cost when we decide to do it our way instead of God's way.

As you continue in the book of Jonah, the very book of Jonah it says now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Now this is the part of the story that we are so familiar with. This is the part of the famous being cast into the water, being swallowed by the great fish and eventually in chapter 2 being swallowed up or vomited up on the land. When I say the prophetic picture, what's interesting is in all of the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ, and for those of you who are seasoned veterans here, members and attenders, you have heard this analogy from me no less than a dozen times since I've been the pastor and the

reason is it's the only sign Jesus gave. In Matthew 12, critics are surrounding him, they are condemning him for his message and his ministry, they say, "Jesus, give us something more. We need to know that we know that we know you're the real deal." So what does he say? "As the prophet Jonas was three nights and three days in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of Man," speaking of himself, "be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." Do you not find it interesting that Jesus Christ who could have alluded to any person in the Old Testament to picture who he was, picks the one who may be the most controversial of all of them? How many times have we debated, how many times have we conversed of do you really think somebody could hang out in a well for three days and three nights? We'll get to that in just a moment. But think about it, every character in the Old Testament that alluded to the person of Jesus Christ, did not do so completely but partly, he could have said, "I'm like Abraham. I'm going to begin a new work in your life. I'm going to be like Moses and I'm going to deliver you from the slavery of sin. I'm going to be like Joshua and I'm going to take you into the Promised Land. I'm going to be like David and I'm going to reign eventually forever." "One sign, tell us the one thing, Jesus, that makes you different than anybody else." He said, "Just look at the story of Jonah. Look at that prophet who was cast for three days and three nights."

Now I want to continue in chapter 2, it says,

1 Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,

Hold onto your theological bootstraps, here we go,

2 And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.

Now some of you may be reading that and saying, "Well, I don't see the word 'hell' there. I see the word 'Sheol.'" Let me give you a little language study here, the word "Sheol" is a Hebrew word that means the place of the dead. Now when we translate that into English, you've got two choices in the Old Testament: you either pick hell or you pick paradise. Remember when Jesus said to the thief that repented, "Today you will be with me in paradise"? But the word "Sheol" means the place of the dead. Contrary to public opinion and the Disney cartoon, according to your Bible, Jonah died. That's what it says. Now is that not the picture of Jesus? Jesus was not as some scholars say swooning in the tomb, just enjoying, shall we say, the decomposition of things. No, what does the Bible say? That Christ died for our sins. Three days and three nights and then what happens to Jonah? He finds himself alive again.

Now in the book of 1 Corinthians 15 it says that over 500 people witnessed it. In this story according to demographers, maybe 50,000 people would have witnessed it. Have you ever thought to yourself why is it that the Ninevites so quickly repented? Why is it that the king as soon he got word was so quick to say put dust and ashes on everybody's head, even the animals? I want you to imagine what Jonah would have looked like on that third day.

Now let me take a time out for a moment. You realize that when Jesus Christ rose from the dead he was in his glorified body. When Jesus Christ rose from the dead he was able to walk through and pass through the walls. So it is a difference at that point and remember it's just an allusion to. You know, today we have all these TV shows about zombies, the walking dead, and those folks out in Hollywood think they are so creative. They're not creative, they just took it from Jonah. Here's a guy walking around, I can only imagine how he looks, kind of got that, you know, that stiff-leg drag thing going on. In fact that's how big it was and that one day into the journey that the people began to repent. People say, "Well, why did it only take one day?" If you saw what this would have looked like, it would have gotten your attention as well. Even if you don't believe what chapter 2, verse 2 says, even if you say, "Well, I don't think he actually died, I just think he sat in a bath of stomach acid for three days," can you imagine what he would have looked like as he walked into that great city of Nineveh. Can you imagine what the residents of Jerusalem thought when that rogue rabbi named the Jesus who was beaten more than any other man according to Isaiah 52, put on the cross, put in Joseph's tomb, when all of a sudden he's walking the streets according to Acts 1 for 40 days.

What did it cause? It caused the people in chapter 3 to repent and what I want you to see today is the power of repentance. As I alluded to, Jonah walks through for a day's journey, his appearance would have been marred at best, and I want you to hear what the king says. He has responded to the message, he has given orders to the entirety of Nineveh of what they are to do, and in verse 8 he says,

8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? 10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

Now there's a valuable lesson in here about the power of repentance but before we deal with the power, we have to deal with what is repentance. I think in our culture today we have misdefined repentance as, "I'm sorry," or, "Oops, I did it again. Oh, I hate that that happened." You see, repentance by strict definition means to be headed in one direction and to do an about-face in the opposite thereof. What do you see in Nineveh, what do you see in the king's life? They ceased from their sinful behavior, they ceased from their acts of sin. In other words, they said, "God, we're serious about this, we're not even considering continuing what we were doing." Now in our culture today, that's a revolutionary thought because today we want to make excuses for, we want to justify that we could do anything we want, anytime we want, for any reason that we want.

Allow me to illustrate from an article I read this week because I don't watch the show. There was an article in regards to one of these reality shows that is named either the Bachelor or the Bachelorette, whichever version you are watching, and it was an interview of one of the contestants on this reality show where she was speaking, she, of

not only her relationship with Jesus but her promiscuity in the evenings, and one of the other contestants as well as the interviewer was questioning, "How do you reconcile those things?" I want to hear what she said and I'm paraphrasing. I apologize that I will misquote at some level. She said, "Jesus has forgiven me of all this. It's all behind the cross." In other words, she was saying, "Because Jesus rose from the dead, I can do whatever I want, it doesn't matter. It's not sin anymore." I got news for you, this young lady has no idea of what repentance is. Coming to Jesus and saying, "Jesus, thank you for going to the cross, thank you for raising from the dead, now I can sin without a guilty conscience," that, my friends, is not repentance.

Notice what the king said, "Even put the ashes on the cattle," almost as if to say, "We don't even want to take a chance that the cows and the chickens might have violated the laws of God." He ceased from previous activity. Repentance. You know, the Bible says in the book of James that even the demons believe and they shudder. You can acknowledge that Jesus was born of a virgin, you can acknowledge he lived a sinless life, you can acknowledge he went to the cross and rose from the dead, but until you say, "But Jesus, I yield and turn my sins over to you. In the best way I know how, I want to live my life for you and not for myself," then and only then do you grasp what it really means to turn.

Interesting that the Ninevites understood which leads to chapter 4 and a very problematic response. I want you to notice what happens in verse 1. There is that word again, "But." By the way, if you're keeping a tally in the book of Jonah there are a lot of "buts" in there. It's telling the story, "But Jonah." It's telling the story, "But God." Notice what it says in verse 1,

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. 2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. 3 Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. 4 Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? 5 So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

One of the greatest litmus tests that you have for your relationship with the Lord is how you respond when people get right with the Lord. In other words, when someone is saved, when someone repents, when someone changes their evil ways, you celebrate it in spite of the damage that may have been caused by them toward others or yourself. The reason that this is so problematic is what the Lord did in the last verse of chapter 3, he decided not to exhibit his wrath on the Ninevites, rather than death he gives life, rather than darkness he gives light, rather than hell he gives heaven, to use our analogy, and Jonah didn't like it, and the reason that chapter 4 is so problematic is the way that it ends. You know that Jonah, chapter 4, the last verse ends differently than any book in your

Bible. I want you to notice the very last thing in verse 11 of chapter 4. It's a question mark. In other words, the Lord does not give us a definitive answer on Jonah. Notice verse 11, this is the Lord's words,

11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

Question mark. Now there are a lot of people who have questioned why would there be a question mark? Why do we not know the end of the story? I don't know if we can definitively say but one of the things I wonder is this, I wonder if there's a question mark because even though it's a story of repentance, even though it's a story of forgiveness and grace and mercy at the hand of God to the Ninevites, it's also the story of how you and I oftentimes look a whole lot like Jonah and we have to question ourselves, are we truly believers, are we truly interested in the things of God, or are we just religious-ites giving lip service to the Lord? Jonah willingly said what the Lord told him to say but was upset that he said it, mad that they repented. In fact, one of the things that I like about chapter 4 is it says he set up a booth, in other words, he set up a place for others to join him. It's interesting that when we are rebellious to the Lord, we not only go away from the Lord, get mad and angry with the Lord, we want to invite others to join us in the process.

But the Lord ends it with a question mark, and so I think the question for all of us today is, are we Jonah, because the one thing we do know in this story is that the Ninevites received grace at the hands of God and the jury is out on Jonah because of the question mark. If you read the story from the distance, Jonah is a prophet of God, he must be good with God, the Ninevites are sinful, they must be horrible, yet when you get to the end of the story, the Ninevites have repented and believed and Jonah has pouted and gotten angry. Interesting how the Lord has flipped the script on this classic story.

So as you look in the mirror, as I look in the mirror of our spiritual life today, we have to ask ourselves is there a question mark there or is there a period?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that individual today that the Lord through his Spirit and his word spoke clearly that there's a question mark in your life, there's an unknown, there's a lack of confidence, and maybe today's the day the Lord is saying there needs to be a period where you've placed a question mark. Or maybe you're that person today who needs to come to that point where it's not lipservice, it's not showing up at the right place at the right time, "doing the right things," but acknowledging your sinful condition, repenting of it and asking Jesus Christ alone to save you. If you're that person today, can I just encourage you to do what Romans 10:13 says, it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord should be saved. Now call on the name of the Lord or to pray, you don't have to do this out loud, in fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say but maybe your cry to the Lord today just wherever you are would be something like this. "God, today I want to admit, I want to acknowledge that I'm the problem. I know I'm the problem and I believe that Jesus Christ is the answer. God, I do believe, I do believe that Jesus loved me so much he

was willing to be born on my behalf. I do believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I do believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay the price of my sin on his cross. And I do believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to raise from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to the problems of the world but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. God, today I admit that I have sinned. I desire for Jesus Christ alone to turn my life around. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to do so."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today, you know, the Bible says in Luke 15 when just one person repents of their sin, that all of the heaven and all of the angels rejoice. We'd love to celebrate with you. Or maybe you're that person like we're going to have someone in a later service, who has made that decision but needs to follow in believer's baptism, or maybe you're that person like those that have already discussed with me today on the campus and say this needs to be the place where we plug in, this needs to be our family faith, or maybe you just need to pray with someone. We'd love to celebrate whatever the Lord is doing in your life this day.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, thank you, O God, that your hand of grace and your hand of mercy stretches further than our sin and our rebellion. Thank you, O God, that you desire for our lives to be protected by your grace and your mercy, your will, your way and your word. O God, may we not be like so many even ourselves we've seen who want to justify an excuse our rebellious behavior. May we believe today that to do it your way is eternally better than any other option. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as Jimmy leads us, whatever decision, we will be right here at the front.