

The Book of Jonah

Introduction

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God, man on the run, storm at sea, eaten by giant fish, market place street preaching, a great change of heart and an angry minister on a hill. This is the stuff fairy tales are made of. This is one of the books of the Bible that is both brutally real and vividly hard to believe. But, here we have it. The Word of God according to the book of Jonah.

This story was aimed the heart of a nation, Israel. Not a nation as in geographical boundaries. A nation as a collection of people identified together. In this case, a nation identified with the creator God. A people with a long past reaching back to antiquity. They are descendants of Abraham. They have a constitution and worship manual given them by God through one of their great leaders, Moses. They have a land was given them, which they left for over 400 years, which they had to reconquer and which they have had to defend over and over again. They have been ruled by judges and by kings. Some kings have been good and godly. Some kings have been wicked and competent. Some kings have been wicked and incompetent.

IT is now circa 760 BC. Assyria has slowly risen to become a regional power. She was ruled by succession of powerful and weak kings. Those ruling from Nineveh were known for their extreme cruelty, even by the standards of the day. The city states that comprised the Assyrian empire threatened and eventually conquered northern Israel. They took the 10 northern tribes into captivity and forced them to assimilate with the Assyrian people.

Jonah seems to have ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II, who ruled Israel from 784 to 753 B.C This would be about one hundred and fifty years after the death of King Solomon. However, the Lord gave Israel a period of great prosperity under Jeroboam. He was a wicked, but capable ruler (2 Kings 14:25–27).

Jonah was probably a well-established prophet in Israel *before* God called him to go to preach in Nineveh. Jonah was not a novice. He was a seasoned prophet of God. The Assyrians would certainly have watched the resurgence of Israel with great interest. At that time Assyria was going through a time of internal trouble because of political struggles. At that time, God chose to send Jonah to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria and the greatest city in the world. In God's providence and purposes, with Israel growing strength and Assyria in some turmoil, this was the moment in which the prophet's ministry would have the greatest impact. And to the superstitious, sun worshipping Assyrians, the solar eclipse on June 15, 763 was a portent.

In sending Jonah to the heathen Ninevites, God would show his grace to them. God's grace to the Gentiles would be a witness against Israel. The prosperous, but ungrateful and unfaithful covenant people of Israel would be rebuked for their evils. This is precisely what Jonah is remembered for in the New Testament (Matthew 12:39–41).

³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise

up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

It is likely that Jonah regarded his mission as little more than a side-track from the regular ministry he had to his own people. Such are the ironies of God's providence. The greatest of blessings are sometimes found in the most unexpected and unlikely places'.

Adapted from Gordon, Keddie, (Keddie, pp. 9-10)

¹ Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

Let us put ourselves in Jonah's shoes for a moment. You are a preacher, called by God to speak God's Words to God's people. Now some prophets have been called to speak God's Words to the Gentiles. But not often and almost always condemnation. Now, "this is your assignment, if you choose to accept it. Go to your worst, most dangerous, most dreadful enemy and preach against them."

What would a modern equivalent be? Maybe Tehran, Iran, a past and present neighbor of Assyria. Here is your assignment. Go, get on a plane, fly to Tehran. Stand in the main streets as obviously an American and a Christian, and denounce the country, the government, the people and proclaim their soon coming doom. Are you game?

The Structure of the Story

Jonah is written in typical Hebrew parallelism. It has a simple structure that carries the flow of the story. Here is a simple presentation of that structure.

The Prophet Called

The Prophets Runs

The Prophet Pursued

Song from the Grave - "Salvation is of the Lord"

The Prophet Delivered

The Ninevites Repent

The Prophet Corrected

As we read the story this morning and study in the coming weeks, listen for that structure.

And here is the story from the New Living Translation.

The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."

But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish.

But the Lord hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

But all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold. So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."

Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?"

Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the Lord. "Oh, why did you do it?" they groaned. And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, "What should we do to you to stop this storm?"

"Throw me into the sea," Jonah said, "and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault."

Instead, the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land. But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they couldn't make it. Then they cried out to the Lord, Jonah's God. "O Lord," they pleaded, "don't make us die for this man's sin. And don't hold us responsible for his death. O Lord, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons."

Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the storm stopped at once! The sailors were awestruck by the Lord's great power, and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him.

Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish. He said,

"I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble,
and he answered me.
I called to you from the land of the dead,
and Lord, you heard me!

You threw me into the ocean depths,
and I sank down to the heart of the sea.
The mighty waters engulfed me;
I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves.

Then I said, 'O Lord, you have driven me from your presence.
Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.'

"I sank beneath the waves,
and the waters closed over me.
Seaweed wrapped itself around my head.
I sank down to the very roots of the mountains.
I was imprisoned in the earth,
whose gates lock shut forever.

But you, O Lord my God,
snatched me from the jaws of death!
As my life was slipping away,
I remembered the Lord.
And my earnest prayer went out to you
in your holy Temple.

Those who worship false gods
turn their backs on all God's mercies.
But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise,
and I will fulfill all my vows.

For my salvation comes from the Lord alone."

Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach.

Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you."

This time Jonah obeyed the Lord's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow.

When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city:

"No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us."

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."

The Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?"

Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed.

Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?"

"Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!"

Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

Reflect and Respond

This is the Word of God to us...

It is a story about racism and nationalism and religious elitism.

It is a story about disobedience and its consequences.

It is a story about God who shows grace and mercy to unbelieving, wicked, pagan Gentiles.

It is a story about the bigger stories – the story of the Bible and the story of redemption.

