

Jonah

Good morning. If you have your Bible, I invite you to open it to the book of Jonah. We have been in a series on the minor prophets. If you have been following along the last few weeks, you should have no trouble finding Jonah near the other books we have looked at this far.

Jonah might be one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. I'm sure many of us grew up hearing the story of Jonah and the fish in Sunday school or children's church. Maybe you heard the story at bedtime, or you read it to your kids. In fact, David Platt did a whole Secret Church devoted to this book last year. This is a well-known book. However, with things that are familiar to us, we can easily become numb or passive in our reading of it. I think this happens a lot with songs we sing. If we know a song really well, our tendency is to just sing it from muscle memory or lip service rather than thinking deeply about the words as we sing and engaging our hearts and minds in worship. That's one reason why I love to sing new songs, because it causes us to pause and really focus on the words of the song.

Regardless of whether this book is familiar to you or foreign to you, this is not just a cute story we read kids. This is the Word of God. And the Word of God is meant to challenge our understanding of God and ourselves by examining our lives and exposing any areas of error and sin.

Before we read the text this morning, I want to help set the context for this book. Jonah is a prophet in the northern kingdom around the time of Hosea and Amos in the 8th century B.C. The only other reference to Jonah is in 2 Kings 14:25 where

we are told that Jonah prophesies that Jeroboam II, the king of Israel in the northern kingdom, will restore and even expand the borders of Israel.

Pastor Nathan has mentioned before how some of these prophets proclaim a message not just by their words, but God uses their life as an illustration or message. We saw this with Hosea as his marriage with Gomer was a picture of God's relationship with Israel. And here in Jonah, we will see Jonah's life being the focal point of the story rather than a prophetic message proclaimed.

As we have already seen with Hosea and Joel and will continue to see as we walk through the minor prophets, many of the prophets are prophesying to the nation of Israel [Picture], either the northern kingdom (Israel) or southern kingdom (Judah). They are sent to proclaim judgement against the nation for disobeying God's Word and breaking his covenant. What is different about Jonah is that he is called to prophesy against Nineveh, a great city of Assyria. Not Israel. The Gentiles. The Pagans.

If you have spent any time reading the Old Testament and the stories of the kings in Israel, you know that the Assyrians are an enemy of Israel. During Jonah's time, Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel because they were engaged in conflicts with other nations. They were also experiencing famine and many revolts within the empire. While they were not the major power in Jonah's day as they would later become, they were known for their cruelty and oppression. This was a dangerous people. These people were despised and hated by the Israelites. We see through the prophetic books how God later uses the Assyrians to bring about judgement to the nation and take captives from the land. We have actually have a picture of what the Assyrians and the people of Nineveh looked like.

[Picture] Too soon?

With this background in mind then, I'd actually like us to read the whole book of Jonah. It's only 48 verses. You may think that is a lot, but Joel actually has 73 verses, and it's not in a narrative story. Because Jonah is this narrative story about

his life and response to God, I think it is helpful for us to hear it in its entirety before examining it more closely together.

Would you follow along with me as I read the book of Jonah.

READ Jonah

Would you pray with me?...

INTRODUCTION

[ILLUSTRATION]

Well, this past week we celebrated our son, Noah's, first birthday. And you know the grandparents and family got gifts for him. But he's one, so he really doesn't have a clue what's in the gifts. And to be honest, I don't think he really cares. But because the weekend was really focused on Noah, Hannah's parents wanted to get a small little gift for Evelyn. Now, Evelyn does care about gifts. She's almost four and she has some pretty high expectations and assumptions about what the word "gift" means.

So, Hannah's parents tell Evelyn that they got her a little gift and she gets super excited. Her mind is full of all kinds of expectations and assumptions about what this gift is going to be. And to her great disappointment, she finds out it is a little sticker book. I can tell you, she was less than thrilled. 3-year-olds have no problem showing their feelings or disapproval. But her expectations and assumptions did not match with reality. And this was almost too much for her to bare.

And, in reality, this is true for probably all of us. So often we have assumptions about things that we believe are true. That we believe matches reality. But they are not. We take our assumptions and make them concrete doctrines that we live by. But when they are challenged or exposed to be false, this can lead to our own outbursts of anger or frustrations. And this is what we see in the book of Jonah.

What we see is a prophet with wrong assumptions about God, about other people, about the nations, and we see him react no differently from a 3-year-old when those assumptions are challenged and proven false.

The main point I want us to see this morning from the book of Jonah is that every Christian should conform their lives to the word of the Lord to be a repentant, obedient, and compassionate people.

To help us see this in our text, I want us to examine the characters in the story by asking three questions: 1) What is God really like? 2) What is Jonah really like? and 3) What are “they” really like? In light of these questions, we will conclude by examining ourselves and asking, “What am I really like?”

WHAT IS GOD REALLY LIKE?

The first question we need to address is, “What is God really like?”

In this story, Jonah seems to have his own understanding of God. He acknowledges some truths about who God is, but he also makes a pretty grave assumption. And I think we all do this, right? There are truths about God from his Word that we believe and cling to and build our life upon. But I believe many of us probably hold some assumptions of our own about God that may not be accurate. That may not be in line with who God really is as he has revealed himself in Scripture. And maybe it’s not always about who God is, but how God works in the world.

Let’s first look at what Jonah acknowledges about God that is true. Jonah acknowledges that God is the Creator. He says in chapter 1 verse 9:

⁹ And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” – Jonah 1:9

This is true. God is the Creator of the world and everything in it. Jonah also acknowledges in chapter 2 that God is sovereign. He says in verse 3,

³ For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me. – **Jonah 2:3**

It was actually the sailors who picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea. But Jonah recognizes that all of this was God's doing. He was sovereignly orchestrating the stormy sea, the sailors hurling him into the water, and the fish swallowing him. All of it is in God's control.

He also acknowledges that God is Savior. This is also true. Look at verses 4 and 9 of chapter 2, he says:

⁶ yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God. – **Jonah 2:6**

⁹ Salvation belongs to the Lord! – **Jonah 2:9**

There is salvation in no one else but the Lord. And lastly, Jonah acknowledges the true character of God. Look at chapter 4 verse 2:

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. – **Jonah
4:2**

Jonah was right to believe this about God because this is how God revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 34. Moses asks to see God's glory and God puts him in

the cleft of a rock and covers him with his hand as he passes by. Then it says in verses 6 and 7,

⁶The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” – Exodus 34:6-7

All of these are true things about God that Jonah believed. God is the Creator. God is sovereign. Salvation comes from God alone. God is gracious and merciful abounding in steadfast love.

However, Jonah had one grave assumption about God. Apart from his foolish assumption that he could flee from the presence and calling of God. Jonah had a wrong assumption about how God works in the world. He wrongly assumed that God’s grace and compassion are only for Israel. Or better, God’s grace and compassion *should only* be for Israel.

Jonah knew these truths about God. As he proclaimed to the sailors in chapter 2, he was a Hebrew who feared the Lord. But he didn’t understand God’s plan of redemption for the nations. Throughout the Old Testament we see glimpses of God’s plan to redeem the nations. He chooses to use Israel as the means of bringing in the nations. This is clear from the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 when God tells him that in him “all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

In Exodus, God establishes the nation of Israel as a kingdom of priests to the nations. They are to mediate the presence of God in the world and display his glory to the nations. The Psalms speak of the nations rejoicing before the Lord and praising God. And this is a clear message from the prophets as God says through the prophet Isaiah in chapter 49,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” – Isaiah 49:6

What is God really like? Well, He is Holy. He will bring judgement upon sin. But he is also a merciful and compassionate God. Not just to Israel, but to the nations. His plan has always included saving a people from the nations. We see God’s plan fulfilled in Revelation 5 as those around the throne of God worshiping Christ and saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.” – Revelation 5:9-10

As I mentioned earlier, I think we can all be guilty of the very same assumption Jonah had about God. It is easy to assume that God is for *us* and against everyone else. You may even see God as the God of America. That America is God’s chosen nation. That God is ultimately concerned about what happens to America than any other nation in the world. Well, I hope that what I have briefly shown from Scripture is that this is absolutely false. God is the God over the nations. He is concerned ultimately about his glory.

We need to bring our assumptions about God to his Word and examine them. Let the Word of God inform us about who he is, how he works in the world, and what he is concerned about. We will soon find that God is not about us, but about himself and his own glory. That he is a compassionate God, and that compassion extends to all nations.

WHAT IS JONAH REALLY LIKE?

Now that we have examined what God is really like, we need to look at the question, “What is Jonah really like?”

The book opens as is typical of many of the books of the prophets with the word of the Lord coming to the prophet. The Lord brings a message to the prophet he wants them to proclaim, and the prophet delivers the message to the people. However, this is not what happens with Jonah. The book of Jonah is actually a very ironic book. And in many ways, Jonah doesn’t look anything like a prophet throughout the story. We see that he is disobedient, unrepentant, and unconcerned about people perishing.

The word of the Lord comes to Jonah, commanding him to go to Nineveh, and Jonah flees the scene, seeking to run away from God and his calling. This is not what we would expect to happen from someone labeled “prophet.” This “prophet” is disobedient to the word of the Lord. And he doesn’t just say, “No.” He actually tries to run away from God’s calling. He tries to go as far as he can in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Nineveh is to the east and Jonah seeks to go to Tarshish. Many scholars believe this would have been a city in modern-day Spain, all the way out West. The end of the world as they knew it.

Not only is he disobedient to God’s Word, but he is also unrepentant. While Jonah is in the belly of the fish, we have this prayer in chapter 2. If you look closely at it, you will notice that this is a prayer of deliverance from certain death in the sea. He says in verse 1,

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. – Jonah 2:1

⁵The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. – Jonah 2:5-6

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" – **Jonah 2:9**

This is a prayer of thanksgiving and deliverance. And that is not completely wrong of him. His life was spared. But I think what is shocking is that we don't see a prayer of repentance. This prayer looks similar to other psalms of deliverance, but not a psalm of repentance like Psalm 51 where David laments his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah and how he sinned against God.

But nowhere in the story of Jonah do we see any kind of repentance mentioned. Not one mention of his sin of disobedience and rebellion against God. Even when the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time in chapter 3, he does what God commands...to some extent. He goes to Nineveh, but he does not go very far into the city. Even more than that, Jonah seems to do about the bare minimum of what God required, preaching a sermon of only 8 words in English (5 in Hebrew). By the grace of God, the entire city repents of their sins from the 8 words of Jonah.

I'm sure some of you might be wishing our sermons were only 8 words. But you know, if you guys respond to the word of God the way the Ninevites did, I'm sure we would be happy to do that!

This city-wide repentance infuriates Jonah. He is angry that God would relent from bringing judgement and destruction to his enemies. It says in chapter 4:5,

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. – **Jonah 4:5**

Even after they have repented, and he angrily confronts God. Jonah goes to sit and watch in hopes that God will not relent from his judgement. He's setting up

shop to watch and eagerly wait for God's judgement to fall on Nineveh. Maybe he is hoping for a Sodom and Gomorrah moment with fire falling from heaven. The prejudice of Jonah is revealed. And you may think, "Well, of course he has prejudice for the Assyrians, they were enemies of Israel. Cruel people. Why wouldn't he?"

We might think this way because I think we all like to be arbiters of justice in our own lives. How many times has someone swerved past you in their car and took off speeding down the road? And do you then eagerly look and hope that you will soon pass them on the side of the road pulled over by a cop? Yeah, of course you do! We want them to get what they deserve! But we also want to ignore the fact that we were speeding too. Maybe just not as fast.

But I think what this really reveals about Jonah is that he lacks the compassion of God. This is even more evident by his complete lack of concern for people perishing. There are a few examples of this. Look again at chapter 1:4-5:

⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. – **Jonah 1:4-5**

The sailors are terrified, and they are doing everything they can possibly do to save their lives and the lives of those on board. But what is Jonah doing? He is sleeping. What is even more revealing is that he never comes forward. They have to cast lots to find out it is Jonah.

I mean can you imagine that? The ship is in chaos as people are throwing stuff overboard, calling out to their gods, doing all they can to survive. The captain comes down and wakes up Jonah to do something like everyone else. They resort to casting lots to see if they can find out who is at fault. Jonah just stands there

while this is happening. He just waits until the lot falls on him. He really has no concern for these sailors. He is not a light to the Gentiles. He is only concerned with himself.

We have already seen this lack of concern for other people in chapter 4 when God relents of his destruction on the city of Nineveh, and Jonah sets up to observe their doom. In fact, rather than being concerned about people perishing, the only thing we see Jonah concerned about perishing in the whole book is the plant in chapter 4. Look again at verses 6-9:

⁶Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." – **Jonah 4:6-9**

God calls Jonah out on his lack of concern for people, revealing Jonah's selfishness and self-righteousness. This is not how we would expect a story of one of the prophets of God to go. The book ends with this question to Jonah and there is no resolve. We are again never told if Jonah repents of his ways or his response to God's question. But one thing we see throughout this story is that God continually shows grace to him.

He saves Jonah from death in the sea. He uses Jonah's sentence-long sermon to save an entire city, he provides shade for him, and he exposes the sin of his heart. All of this is the grace of God being lavished upon Jonah. Jonah is a receiver of God's grace but not a giver of God's grace.

What is Jonah really like? He is a prophet who is disobedient, unrepentant, prejudice, unconcerned about people perishing, and self-righteous. And yet, God shows grace to him and uses him as a means of grace to others.

As believers, may we never forget that this is our story too. God showed grace to us while we were still sinners and saved us. And now, he uses us to show his grace to others. Too often, we are disobedient. Too often, we are unrepentant. Too often, we show lack of concern for those around us who don't know Jesus. Through it all, God continues to show his grace to us.

WHAT ARE "THEY" REALLY LIKE?

We've looked at what God is really like and what Jonah is really like, but now I want us to ask, "What are 'they' really like?" And by "they", I mean those on the opposing side of us. For Jonah, this is the pagan, idolatrous sailors, and the evil, sinful Ninevites. At least, this is how it seems Jonah views them.

But I think we are given a clear contrast between these pagan, Gentile people and the prophet of God in response to word of the Lord. As we saw, Jonah, a Hebrew and prophet of Israel, was disobedient, unrepentant, and unconcerned about people perishing. However, we see the exact opposite from the people of the nations. They are obedient, repentant, and show concern for people.

We see the sailors be obedient to the word of the Lord, repentant, and show great concern for people perishing. They hear about the Creator God from Jonah, and they ask what they must do to stop the storm. Jonah tells them to throw him overboard. But they are so concerned about people's lives that they try as hard as they can to get to shore without throwing him overboard. They realize their striving is in vain and it says in verse 14,

¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled

him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. – **Jonah 1:14-16**

These pagan, idolatrous sailors that Jonah believes probably deserves the judgement of God for their idolatry, are the ones who look more like the people of God than Jonah. They respond to the word of the Lord, not run from it. They show repentance through offering a sacrifice to the Lord. And they show great concern for the lives of people in their determination to save everyone on board, even Jonah's life when he seemed resolved to go overboard.

And what about the Ninevites? They too show obedience to God's Word, repentance, and concern for people perishing. Look again at chapter 3:4,

⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. – **Jonah 3:4-5**

The king issues a decree to everyone and tells them in verse 8,

"Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." – **Jonah 3:8-9**

These dangerous, cruel, enemies of Israel respond better than the prophet of God. They hear the word of the Lord and believe. They repent through fasting and putting on sackcloth and ashes. The king tells everyone to turn from their evil ways. Why? So that they may not perish. He is concerned for the lives of people. He is concerned about people perishing.

This stark contrast between the response of Jonah to the word of the Lord and the response of these Gentiles to the word of the Lord really reveals the heart of Jonah and maybe even his assumptions about these people. That these people are so cruel, so evil, so lost in pagan idolatry that they will never hear the word of God. They will never repent and believe. And to be honest he doesn't even want them to.

This is a danger we can all fall into. Excluding people from the grace of God. Wanting to be the arbiters of God's grace and justice. Who is the "they" in your life? Maybe it is a people of a different race than you. Maybe it's people in the LGBTQ+ movement. Maybe it's the abortion rights activists. Maybe it's democrats. Maybe it's republicans. Maybe it's your co-workers. Or family members. Maybe it's your parents. Or your kids.

We can be like Jonah and have a self-righteousness because we have the truth. We have the knowledge of God. And we can view the world as "us versus them". That God is for us against them. That they are too evil to hear the word of the Lord. That they are too entrenched in their ideologies to hear the word of the Lord. But what this story shows us is that maybe "they" are not like we expect. That maybe, they just need to hear the word of the Lord. Who knows. They may in fact show more repentance and obedience to the word of the Lord than the people of God.

WHAT AM I REALLY LIKE?

Which leads me to our last question this morning for really all of us to reflect on, "What am I really like?"

We are shown this stark contrast between what God is really like and what Jonah is really like. And the question is, who are you really like in this story? Do you look more like God or like Jonah? The obvious goal for Christians is to be more like Christ, more like God. To have his heart of compassion for others. But is that true for you?

Are you obedient to God's Word in your life? Is your life characterized by repentance? Do you have a concern for people perishing? Do you have a heart of compassion for others? My prayer and God's desire for you is that you answer yes to these. As believers, he is conforming us to the image of his Son. And our calling looks a lot like Jonah's. Jonah was called to go to the nations to proclaim the word of the Lord. As disciples of Jesus, he has called us to go to the nations and proclaim the good news of the gospel. Matthew 28 says,

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." – Matthew 28:18-20

Maybe you are here this morning and you have never repented of your sin. You have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. If that's you, then I invite you to hear the word of the Lord this morning. God is holy and he is just. All of us stand guilty before God as sinners. We have broken God's law, and we live in rebellion against him. He has every right to judge us for our wickedness, our idolatry, our rebellion, and our sin against him. But as we have seen today, God is also gracious and merciful. And it is because of this grace and mercy of God that he sent his Son, Jesus, to take on flesh and dwell among us. To live in perfect obedience to his word. Something Jonah nor us could ever do in ourselves.

And though Jesus was perfect, sinless, and completely obedient to God, he took on the punishment we deserved for our sin and rebellion, death. He died on the cross in our place, taking the punishment of our sin upon himself to satisfy the wrath of God. But he did not stay dead. He rose again on the third day, showing his power over death and the grave. And those who trust in his life, death, and resurrection can be saved of their sins and walk in newness of life. And one day, be resurrected with him.

I urge you this morning to hear the word of the Lord and respond like the sailors and the Ninevites did, in repentance and faith. If you have questions about this, please talk with the pastors or someone here this morning about how you can be forgiven of your sins and saved from the judgement of God.

CONCLUSION

All of us have assumptions about God and others. If you were to unwrap your views about God and your assumptions of others by examining them in light of God's Word, would you be shocked or surprised to find that your assumptions and expectations are different than reality? Or would they align with what God has revealed in his word?

Are we allowing the word of God to shape our views and understanding about him? Do we come to God's Word and impose our own views and understandings on the text, or do we come eager to be challenged and have our views conformed to his word? May we all pray and ask God to examine our hearts through his word and reveal any errors in our thinking.

Are we willing to go to those we oppose, disagree with, or dislike with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Or have we written them off and excluded them from God's grace? May we be faithful to his calling to go to the nations, to show love and compassion to our enemies and to our neighbors.

The word of the Lord has been read this morning and has come to you. How are you going to respond to it this morning? Will you be like Jonah and run from God's calling? Or will you respond in repentance, faith, and obedience?

Would you pray with me?

COMMUNION

I'm going to invite the band and the deacons to come up. This morning we have the opportunity to partake of the Lord's Supper together.

At Cornerstone, we invite everyone who professes faith in Christ to participate in communion. Scripture warns against taking communion in an unworthy manner. And so, if you have not placed your faith in Christ for your salvation, then we would ask that you please refrain from participating and consider your own need for salvation, for the forgiveness of your sins.

In a moment I will pray, and the band will begin playing. We have tables here at the front with both elements. All of the bread is gluten free if that is a concern for you. Each row will be dismissed by one of our deacons and you will come to the table, take both the bread and the cup, and return to your seat. *If you are sitting in the back section, there is a table in the back that you can freely get the elements.*

Please wait until everyone has received the elements and we will take them together as a sign of our unity in Christ.