

“Jonah and the Steadfast Love of the LORD”

The story of Jonah is one of the most well-known stories in all of Scripture. Jesus himself said that his own death and resurrection had been prefigured in the story of Jonah, who was delivered from the great depths and the great fish on the third day.¹ The story of Jonah captures our imaginations, and it has shown up in all kinds of cultural expressions from the catacombs of the Christians of the 3rd and 4th centuries, where it is frequently depicted, to its allusions in other stories as diverse as *Moby Dick* and *Pinocchio*. In 2012, Bruce Springsteen released a song titled *Swallowed Up in the Belly of the Whale*. The movie *Marvel's Avengers* includes a scene in which Iron Man faces an alien whale monster and asks his somewhat snarky AI assistant Jarvis *have you ever heard the tale of Jonah?* Jarvis says *I wouldn't consider him a role model*. Jarvis is right. Jonah is not a role model, but he certainly is someone we can identify with, and if we will, his story can teach us. It has a lot to teach us, and at the heart of everything it teaches us, there is a reality that everyone longs for but few people ever rest in. It's a truth, a theme we freely talk about and claim to know but rarely deeply take to heart.

Jonah teaches us that...

I. THERE IS A LIFE-GIVING TRUTH THAT LIES BENEATH THE SURFACE OF EVEN THE STRANGEST OF STORIES

A. Jonah is not just a children's story. It is a divinely inspired, artistically constructed work of literature with a lot to teach us.

Compare **Jonah 1:1** with **Jonah 3:1**. **Jonah 1:1** What does it say? *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah.”* **Jonah 3:1** What does it say? *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.”* Those verses divide the book into very clear sections of comparison and contrast. The first section is **Jonah 1-2**. The second, **Jonah 3-4**.

Compare **Jonah 1:3-4** and **3:3-4**. In each you have Jonah's response to the word of the LORD. First, in **Jonah 1:3-4** Jonah is commissioned and runs away. Second, in **Jonah 3:3-4**, Jonah is commissioned and obeys.

There are two major sections in which there are six episodes in a series of three parallels. These lead like steps to the seventh episode and a question for reflection. After Jonah's response to the word of God you have the results that follow. In chapter one, you have the threatened destruction of the ship in the storm sent by God and Jonah's interaction with the pagan sailors and the captain. And then in **Jonah 3**, there's the threatened destruction from the judgment of the LORD and Jonah's interaction with the pagan Ninevites and the King. Each section concludes with a prayer. **Jonah 2:1-10** is Jonah's grateful prayer. **Jonah 4:1-4** is Jonah's angry prayer. Both prayers highlight the steadfast love of God.

The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. They invite us to make comparisons and contrasts, but then there is this final, seventh episode, **Jonah 4:5-10** that is unparalleled. It invites us to reflect on the meaning of the whole story.

B. What do we learn from the structure in this inspired book?

One lesson might be about mission: God calls and sends his servants to hard places to bring a warning of judgment and to call people to repentance. And that's a legitimate lesson from Jonah, but is that the only or the central message?

Another lesson might be about the dangers of nationalism, bigotry, and racism. That's part of this story. Jonah is an Israelite. He doesn't seem to care about the Ninevites. They're not his people. That's a problem.

There's also a lesson in trust and obedience to the LORD. Some argue that the themes of mission and racism are not the primary point of the story but simply the occasions in which faith is tested. Like Jonah, whenever God calls us to go where we don't want to go, do what we don't want to do, or serve or love whomever we don't want to serve or love, will we gladly obey or not? Will we obey or be a Jonah?

These themes are all part of the story, not the heart of the story. What is most significant is that which remains constant in each section. In spite of the prophet's self-will and self-pity, disobedience, distress, and anger, what is unchanging is what is revealed in the prayers and highlighted in God's final question. The steadfast love of the LORD is mentioned in both prayers. This is the unifying and predominant theme. All of the other themes are subordinate to it and support it.

In the first prayer, **Jonah 2:8** states a universal principle that reveals what is at stake in the whole story. *Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of **steadfast love**.* In the second prayer, Jonah, foolishly and ironically angry at God, most clearly reveals God's true nature. This is the crucial verse for understanding the heart of the message of Jonah. **Jonah 4:2**: *"O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in **steadfast love**, and relenting from disaster."*

It is this same steadfast love of the Lord that patiently engages Jonah in the seventh episode of the book – the dialogue at the end of the story, God asks Jonah, *Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?* The abounding steadfast love of the Lord, his compassion for sinners like the Ninevites, for strugglers like Jonah and all the others – all of us that's the theme. It's the greatest theme in Scripture in its developed in Jonah in God's interaction with all the main characters, Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites.² It is what is offered to us also.

But the book of Jonah also teaches us an important corresponding truth, and it's as important to understand this truth about ourselves as it is to understand the truth about God. Jonah is not a role model. What his story teaches us is that...

I. THE LOVE OF GOD ISN'T JUST A THING TO KNOW ABOUT, IT'S A REALITY IN WHICH TO DWELL AND BY WHICH TO LIVE.

The book of Jonah presents Jonah as disobedient, selfish, bitter, angry, and foolish. And yet, no one would have known the details of the story to tell it except Jonah himself. So the evidence suggests Jonah, on the other side of his own repentance and restoration, is inspired by God to tell his own story in a self-deprecating manner that highlights how foolish he had been.

Look at **Jonah 4:2** again. Jonah raises his voice, as if it were a fist to God, and says, *I knew that you're a God abounding in steadfast love.* How ironic. If you *know*, God is gracious, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love wouldn't it make sense to trust and obey, to choose obedience, not bitterness? God speaks to you in Jonah, as he speaks with Jonah at the end. He asks a question. It's incredibly patient of him and gracious of him that he enters into dialogue with us even when, like Jonah, we are willful and angry and demanding and impatient.

The question he's asking is, *“Do you deeply believe what you say you believe? You can clearly articulate the reality of the love of God, but do you actually receive and rest in the assurance of the love of God?”*

A. What do you think God wants from you?

On the surface, the story of Jonah is about a man who runs from the call of God, and God pursues him and won't let him go. God intervenes and calls him to fulfill his destiny, and God responds to Jonah's bitterness and anger with patient counsel. All this begs us to ask: *Why?* Why does God pursue him? God can accomplish what he wants without human help. Why does God harness the wind, the waves, the casting of lots, the great fish, and later in the story, the vine, the worm, and the scorching east wind all to teach Jonah? Is it because out of all the people on the earth, *the only one* God could have possibly called to go to Nineveh was Jonah? No! God could raise up some other prophet if he needed to. God could work miraculously apart from human means if he wanted to. There are many mysteries concerning the sovereign will of God. But this truth shows up over and over in the Bible: God doesn't choose us because he needs us. God sets his heart on us, pursues us because he loves us. He wants us to know the power of his steadfast love and to be with him in the work he's doing in this world.

When we were about four or five years into the church plant, I felt like everything was in danger of collapsing. I was stressed and afraid of failing. One afternoon, Jim Cofield, who was at that time a deacon here, came over to help me put together a shed in my backyard. (Jim was for over a decade the head of the practical psychology department at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL.) We're in the backyard building the shed, and while we're working, I'm pouring out my heart to my friend who has this gift of counseling. I'm telling him how I want to see God's Kingdom advancing. I want to see this church established, but we're struggling, and I'm afraid of failing. And while we were doing this, Alex, who I'm thinking was about 4 ½ years old, came out to help us. Alex is out there with his little red plastic toy hammer, trying to help us. At one point, Jim turned to me as he listened to all my angst and said *Larry, your whole contribution to building the Kingdom of God is like this: on your best day with your best efforts, you're like Alex out here with us with this little red hammer helping us. God is building his Kingdom, and he's going to put it together in the final analysis. He doesn't need you and your little red hammer to help him build his Kingdom, but he does like having you out here with him in the*

work he's doing in this world, just like you like having Alex out here with his little red hammer helping dad out. The Father appreciates you doing what you can with what you have where you are to work in harmony with his causes. It's not that he needs your contribution. It's just that he wants you to be involved with him in the work he's doing in the world. Some people might think that would be discouraging, but it was encouraging. It set me free to do my best while realizing what matters most doesn't depend on me. Like the boy with the loaves and fishes, what we have cannot feed the multitudes. Like my son with the little red hammer, what we bring to bear on the issues can't accomplish the work of God, and yet, nevertheless, it is valuable and important. Why? Because the Father wants us with him. He's committed to his purposes in your life and will use you, but in the end, it's not about God needing you to accomplish his mission. It is about God wanting you involved with him in all of life, including his work in the world.

C. God wants you to be with him not just superficially but deeply.

The story of Jonah teaches us how much God wants even a reluctant follower like Jonah to be with not only in external actions but in heart and soul. That's the point of the poignant dialogue God has with Jonah. On his best day, Jonah was like a 4 ½-year-old with a little red hammer and, in his case, a bad attitude. Sometimes, we're all a lot like that. We overestimate how essential our role is, and we underestimate God's steadfast love for sinners, strugglers, and all the others.

Conclusion

Perhaps because the love of God is such a well-known theme, we're in danger, like Jonah, of thinking we know it. Do we? Do you respond to a challenging and confusing word from God with trust and obedience, or like Jonah, do you run from it and him? Do you trust God with things you do not understand, or, like Jonah, do you confess your faith clearly but boil with anger inwardly? We forget what we say we believe.

Sometimes, I hear people complain about certain worship songs because they have a chorus that's repeated over and over again, but did you know the Bible actually had songs that did the same thing? In **Psalm 136**, there's one line, one truth repeated 26 times. And that line is this: *his steadfast love endures forever*. Sometimes, there's a wise purpose behind repetition! Parents tell their children things over and over again so they won't forget. *Remember your lunch money. Don't*

talk to strangers. Look both ways before you cross the road. Watch out for your little brother. You're precious to us. Jesus loves you.

Remember, remember as you live your life. When things are mysterious, when things are hard - hard to understand or hard to endure - remember the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Remember that. It's worth repeating and repeating. We repeat it not just for memory but for emphasis. You need to know this, and you need to know it at a level that affects your heart.

The two great dysfunctions in the life of Jonah, and I imagine they apply to many of us as well, are disobedience to what God wants you to do and bitterness about what God is allowing to happen. The answer for both is not simply to be told to try harder to be more obedient and more joyful. The response that we need is to recognize in those reactions a failure to be living in light of the reality of who God is, and before we renew our efforts, we have to restore our faith in the God who is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. There are so many times in your life and in mine where the most practical and effective thing we can do is not simply to admonish ourselves to try harder but to first encourage ourselves to get clearer and to go deeper in our faith, to pray, to sing, to read Scripture and in doing so turn from the superficial faith that confesses realities it fails to embrace and undermines everything to deeply trust in the love of God.

In **John 15:9**, some of his last words to his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus said *as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you abide in my love*. That means to remember deeply and live out of that awareness of this reality spiritually. In the Lord's Supper, we're asked to remember the death of Jesus, who gave his life to pay for our sins and rose again from the dead. He is the ultimate revelation of God's love. Jesus calls us to come to him. He tells us clearly that because he gave himself to die in our place and to pay for our sins and on the third day rose again from the dead, this abounding and steadfast love of God is freely offered to everyone who will turn to him and trust in him as Savior and Lord. It is offered to you. If you haven't already turned to Christ, trust in him. If you've never done that, you can do that right now, right here today, and it can change the rest of your life because you can enter into a relationship with the God who is steadfast in his patient compassion. If you have come to him. Believe in and abide in his love and trust and obey him always.

Amen

¹ Matthew 12:39-40

² There is a series of books out now called New Studies in Biblical Theology. The editor is D.A Carson. Volume 26 is devoted to the biblical theology of the book of Jonah, and here's the title: *A Gracious and Compassionate God: mission, salvation, and spirituality in the book of Jonah*. The author is Doctor Daniel C. Timmer; in the introduction, Dr. Timmer writes this:

Jonah centers on the grand theme of the Bible: the manifestation of God's unmerited grace to those who have sinned against him. Not only does the author develop this in all of the main characters as God's grace affects the lives of the sailors, of Jonah, and of the Ninevites, but the clearest description of God's character in the book appears in the application to Nineveh of Exodus 34:6–7, where God's great mercy toward rebellious Israel first comes gloriously into view.

Also, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:5,15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8 and Joel 2:13.

The introduction to Jonah in the ESV Study Bible also speaks of the theme of Jonah as the boundless compassion of God. It is available free online here: <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-jonah/>