Jonah: Religiously Wrong · Sermon One

The Call and the Run

God Loves His Enemies

Jonah 1:1–3

Today we begin our new series on the book of Jonah. Jonah is a small book in the Old Testament, and it is one of the twelve minor prophets. That word minor solely describes its length, not its importance.

I would like to stop there for a moment, because what I just said should cause us to assess some things. It's very easy in the Christian faith to think a book of the Bible that is longer is more important than one that is shorter. We do it all the time. We may not give mental assent to it, but if we are honest, you likely care more about the book of Matthew than you do Philemon, or Genesis over Habakkuk.

It's all the word of God. It's all God-breathed, and we should spend time getting to God through all of it. Shorter doesn't mean less important.

i. Fresh Eyes

That being said, what's ironic is that this is probably one of the only minor prophets most Christians do know. If I asked people in the average Western church to tell me about the book of Zephaniah, I'd probably get crickets. But if I said, tell me about Jonah, people would likely tell me the story about the prophet swallowed by the whale. This is in large part due to Christian media. There are books and movies about the prophet Jonah that many who grow up in the church are exposed to at a young age. VeggieTales has probably done more to teach people the story of Jonah than most pastors in the last thirty years.

However, because Christian media has done a lot of work on this book, it can actually work against us in this study. It can leave us with a false sense of familiarity and understanding of the book. We can think we know something, we can have the images in our minds, and therefore not pay as much attention to it as we should.

I will just tell you that this is a real problem in Western Christianity, and I would encourage all the parents to consider this. I know it feels like the right Christian thing to do to insulate our children from the world, to only allow them to experience Christian entertainment. Superbook, VeggieTales, The Chosen, and so on. I'm

not against any of those, let me be clear. The problem, though, is that the Bible isn't meant to be entertainment. It's meant to be weighed, prayed through, studied, and understood. And so often, especially with children, they grow up hearing an inaccurate version of the story. They develop a false understanding and a grid through which to view it, and when they grow up and read it for themselves, it can be difficult for them to remove that lens.

Jonah is one of those books. And I am asking that for this series in particular, you try to remove what you think you know. Get VeggieTales out of your mind. Get your children's church lesson out of your mind (unless Pastor Chris taught it). Let's see Jonah with fresh eyes.

This book is rich with helpful truths, and it is unique among the prophetic books of the Bible. The other prophetic books are largely built around the prophetic words themselves. Jonah is built to tell not the message of the prophet, but the actions and heart of the prophet. On top of that, it's written in such a unique way. There is symmetry, and patterns, repetitions and pairings. We might identify some of that as we go along. But more than that, if the book of Jonah were written today, it might fall into the category of situational irony more than book of prophecy.

It's a book that pairs the godly with the ungodly, where the godly is shown to be the one in the wrong and the ungodly to be right. As such, it's ironic. It's ironic to see the prophet rebel and the pagan repent. It serves as a cautionary tale for us.

Jonah is the one prophet that we are not to emulate.

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ii.

The Backstory

Jonah's story doesn't begin in Jonah. It actually begins in 2 Kings. That is the only other place in the Old Testament where he is mentioned, and it's short. But it sets important context for the person of Jonah that we need to get before we even open his book.

> Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash, began to rule over Israel in the fifteenth year of King Amaziah's reign in Judah. He reigned in Samaria forty-one years. He did what was evil in the LORD's sight. He refused to turn from the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had led Israel to commit. Jeroboam II recovered the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had promised through Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher. For the LORD saw the bitter suffering of everyone in Israel, and that there was no one in Israel, slave or free, to help them. And because the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel completely, he used Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash, to save them.
>
> 2 KINGS 14:23–27, NLT

I get that the passage feels a little disconnected from Jonah, but let me explain. The first Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, was an evil king. He essentially created his own religion and led the entire kingdom into compromise and idolatry: worshipping golden calves, encouraging sexual immorality, oppressing the poor and the hurting. He was awful, and as a result of this compromise, they had lost territory to the nations around them. Generations later, Jeroboam II just continued in his footsteps and was just as evil.

Enter Jonah the prophet. Jonah comes on the scene and prophesies something to them. In the midst of their compromise, in the midst of their willful disobedience, in the midst of their evil and sin, he prophesies mercy and blessing. He tells them that God is going to give them back the territory they lost, because He had compassion on them. And that's it. That's all we have on him, which is significant.

Our introduction to the person of Jonah is that he is the mercy guy. He is really the only prophet to prophesy immediate and direct blessing to God's compromised people without requiring repentance. Usually the message is, "If you repent, there will be blessing." But not here. Jonah's is different. His is, "The Lord sees your suffering and has compassion on you in the midst of your sin, therefore He will strengthen your kingdom."

Think about that. That's who we are dealing with. That is who the Jewish people understand Jonah to be before we ever get to the book of Jonah. Now, turn to Jonah chapter 1.

iii.
The Call

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

There are a few things to note here. The first is that the prophetic word wasn't for the purpose of judgment, but repentance. I know the language doesn't seem to reflect that. "Call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" doesn't sound like "call them to repentance." But it's the same thing. The book itself is going to make that clear at the end.

Here is a principle I want you to remember. So long as you're alive, whether you are saved or not, when God calls you out on your sin, it is always for the ultimate goal of repentance and turning to God. He loves you. He wants you to be His, He wants to have real fellowship and relationship with you, so He calls you to repent.

The second is that Jonah is to prophesy to Nineveh. That may not seem like that big of a deal, but it is. Nineveh would later become the capital of the Assyrian Empire. And the thing to really understand is that this is the only time a prophet is commanded to leave Israel and prophesy to pagans. That's not how it typically works. Usually the prophets are given to the people of God. This would be akin to asking me to go teach the book of James to Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss. Those are two very smart guys who are renowned atheists. They don't care one lick about my teaching on the book of James.

Now, toward the end of the story, spoiler alert, Nineveh is going to repent. This group of people, who seemingly wanted nothing to do with God, secretly actually did. Hear me: sometimes the people who seem the least likely to repent are the most prone to repent if given the opportunity. Here is what that means. As far as you and I are concerned, no one is too far gone. No one is hopeless. Because no one can see what God is doing in the heart.

iv.

Greater Still

Here's our third observation: Nineveh is called a "great" city. Remember I told you that this book is filled with repetition? This is one of them. Everything in this book is great. The word means large, intense, powerful. Nineveh is great, the storm is great, the fish is great, Jonah's anger is great. It's used about fourteen times in the book.

The question is why. Why does Jonah, the author, write this story down and choose to use this word over and over again? It's because this story, while it has many layers to it, is ultimately not a story about Jonah or the Ninevites. It's about the sovereignty of God. The greatness of God. Jonah describes everything as great because in his eyes, from the human perspective, everything was great. Yet he writes in such a way that God is clearly greater than all.

It's a beautiful and poetic way to express that God is sovereign over all. No matter how big or "great" the thing in front of you is, God is greater still.

Some of you need to hear that. Your life is not a boat drifting along, carried by the currents of random chance. The circumstances you face, the things that seem overwhelming, the things that feel completely beyond your control, none of them are beyond the sovereignty of God. The storm may be great. The circumstances may be great. The obstacles in front of you may be great. But the God who rules over them is greater still. And you can trust Him, even when you can't make sense of what He's doing.

The last observation for this verse is that their evil was exceedingly great. "Their evil has come up before me" is the phrase used. This isn't a new phrase. It's used throughout the Old Testament to describe the most wicked nations. The same phrase is used when speaking of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Babylon. Here is the point. This isn't just a secular city. This is an evil city. This is a place, at least in a literary sense, that is akin to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Think about that. In this narrative, God cares so much about this people, this evil, vile, and wicked people, that He sends the prophet Jonah to rescue them. These were Jonah's enemies. Heck, these were God's enemies. That is an important point to consider as we look at what comes next.

v.

The Run

> But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.
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> Jonah 1:3, ESV

Jonah hears this message from the Lord and doesn't want to do it. So he flees. And this is comical. It says he flees from the presence of the Lord. You cannot flee from the presence of God. David himself made this statement in Psalm 139.

> Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.
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> Psalm 139:7–10, ESV

Listen, there are moments where we think God isn't there. He is.

In an effort to avoid this, Jonah goes the opposite direction. Nineveh is to the east, so he goes to Tarshish in the west (which again is ironic, because it's another pagan city). Now let me explain how committed to this plan Jonah is. The Jewish understanding wasn't that Jonah was simply seeking passage, but that he hired the whole ship to take him. One rabbinic account even puts the cost at 4,000 gold dinars. We cannot verify that figure from Scripture, but it illustrates how seriously Jewish interpreters understood Jonah's determination to escape. Just for clarity, in today's terms that would be about a million dollars' worth of gold.

Jonah was so against the Ninevites that he would go to extraordinary lengths to ensure he didn't obey the Lord.

vi.

The Heart of the Lord

Jonah does this because ultimately he doesn't have the same heart for the Ninevites that God does. Jonah hasn't figured out yet that God loves His enemies. And this is the main point I want to land on today.

God loves His enemies. God loves your enemies.

Before You Turn the Page

I want us all to be honest internally. We all have people who feel like enemies. I know we may not use that language, but practically, it's how we feel about them. It's people who have sinned against you, hurt you, abused you, betrayed you, falsely accused you, or slandered you. Or perhaps they did that to someone you love. Your spouse, your kids, your friends.

You are trying to forgive, and maybe you have. But forgiveness hasn't translated to caring for their soul. Or maybe it hasn't translated to freedom in yours. If God told you to show mercy and have hope for them, not through gritted teeth but through a free heart, you might be like Jonah and go the other direction. You don't have to be friends with them, but you do have to have the heart of the Lord for them.

Jonah's big issue, the irony in all this, is that he was all too willing to accept God's mercy for himself and his people when they didn't deserve it, and not willing to do the same for his enemies.

Don't be like Jonah. I feel this ache in my own heart, that as Christians, we must have the heart of the Lord for people, and for our enemies. My hope is that our study in the book of Jonah will produce just that in us.

I want to transition to communion today by reading a passage from Ephesians that I think sums up the message.

> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
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> Ephesians 4:30–32, ESV

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Soli Deo Gloria

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