

Jonah

Jonah is probably the most familiar minor prophet of the Twelve

- Some of you first heard this story in SS
- Even unbelievers are familiar with some of the details of the book of Jonah

But just because the book is popular does not mean that it is immune from attacks

- Due to its repeated emphasis on the supernatural and miraculous, many affirm that this book is intended to be an allegory, parable, or fiction

Notice the many references to the miraculous in the book of Jonah¹⁶

- The storm
- The selection of Jonah by lot as guilty
- The sudden subsiding of the storm
- The great fish appearing at just the right time
- The protection of Jonah inside the fish
- The obedience of the whale to vomit Jonah onto dry ground
- The sudden growth of the plant
- The worm devouring the specific plant over Jonah
- The east wind blowing at just the right time
- The repentance of the entire city of Nineveh

But the book of Jonah is far more than just a parable or allegory

- It is a real story about a real man who attempted to disobey the real God
- It is set in a specific time period, the time of King Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25) – a real king

We are also confronted with the fact that nowhere in Scripture is the book of Jonah interpreted as anything but actual and historical

- Jesus Himself cites Jonah on two specific occasions
- Surely this must be the most important and impressive commentary on the historicity and authenticity of the book of Jonah!

We know that the name Jonah means “dove”¹⁷

- We know that his hometown was Gath-hepher (2 Kgs 14:25)
- This was about three (3) miles from Nazareth

The Pharisees were wrong when they said, “no prophet arises out of Galilee” (John 7:52)

- Jonah was a Galilean!¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 134.

¹⁷ Dr. Alan B. Stringfellow, *Through the Bible in One Year*, 96.

¹⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook*, 241.

The book is very short

- Its message is very simple

The book breaks down into four divisions, each of which chronicles a decision of Jonah

- Chapter 1 – Jonah flees
- Chapter 2 – Jonah prays
- Chapter 3 – Jonah preaches
- Chapter 4 – Jonah prays

I. Jonah flees (chapter 1)

As a Hebrew from the northern kingdom of Judah, Jonah was told, “**Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me**” (1:2)

- This is God’s grace
- He could have simply brought down the hammer of justice and destruction on Nineveh
- However, He was sending one of His prophets to them

As far as we know, the book of Jonah is the only prophecy that is given exclusively to Gentiles¹⁹

- This makes the book very unique in terms of its audience

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria

- At this time, they were not the powerful nation that they would once become

But instead of obeying the LORD, Jonah runs the opposite direction!

- He gets on a ship and tries to outrun God

He went down to Joppa which was a seaport

- It was here that he headed away from Nineveh

It would be several hundred years later before Joppa is mentioned again in the Bible

- The apostle Peter was staying at the city of Joppa in Acts 9
- A man named Cornelius sent some men to bring Peter to his home in order to explain the Gospel
- Cornelius was a Gentile who came to trust in Christ

So we have this association between two Jewish prophets who were around the area of Joppa

But God’s character was more than Jonah anticipated

- Omniscience – God knew everything about Jonah’s heart, motives, and plans
- Omnipotence – God was able to thwart Jonah, who was trying to thwart God’s plans
- Omnipresence – God was everywhere; Jonah could not hide from Him

¹⁹ Feinberg, 134.

Verse 5 tells us, “Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them”

- These idolatrous sailors were each crying out to “his god”
- Obviously, they were not followers of the LORD

These sailors tried to avert the storm in their own power

- However, this God-sent storm was more than they could deal with

While a giant storm is assaulting the boat, Jonah is sound asleep

- The captain awakens him and tells Jonah to call on his god to see if he can get this storm to let up

The sailors then cast lots in order to determine who was at fault

- This was an Old Testament means of understanding the will of God in various situations
- The result was that Jonah was found out to be in the wrong

In verses 8-10, Jonah informs the sailors and the captain of what he had done

- His actions had caused others’ lives to be put in danger

Jonah volunteers to be thrown into the sea

- This would have been a rather dangerous thing to do, considering the winds and the waves
- However, Jonah knew that it was the right thing to do

The sailors tried desperately to row toward land; however, they were unsuccessful (1:13)

- It is amazing how compassionate these unbelievers were with the prophet of God!
- They were more compassionate for one soul than Jonah was over hundreds of thousands of souls in Nineveh²⁰

In verse 14, these sailors pray to the LORD, “We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased.”

- This is very interesting because we have an unbeliever praying to the LORD
- And it is not a prayer for salvation/deliverance from sin

As soon as Jonah was thrown overboard, “the sea stopped its raging” (1:15)

- This shows the amazing control that the LORD has over nature
- We will see this theme repeated over and over again

²⁰ Feinberg, 137.

This sudden change in the weather brought about a respect and fear of the LORD from these unbelieving sailors

- “The men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows” (1:16)
- It is entirely possible that these men came to believe in Yahweh as a result of this²¹

What happened to Jonah?

- God had “appointed” a fish to swallow Jonah

There have been a few accounts of humans being swallowed by large fish

- So Jonah isn’t the only person to have experienced this

Jonah was in the belly of this fish for “three days and three nights” (1:17)

- In the Hebrew mindset, a “day” could have been part of a day

But this wayward prophet was in the belly of this fish for a lot longer than he expected

- This time spent inside the fish is used as a type of how long Jesus Christ was in the tomb (Mt 12:40)

This was a real, historical event

- Not just myth

II. Jonah prays (chapter 2)

While Jonah was inside the fish, he prayed to the LORD

- His prayer is intriguing since there are no requests
- Not once does he ask for anything

Instead, this prayer is shaped and molded after the likeness of the Psalms²²

- If you were to go through this chapter and do a cross-reference, you will see that Jonah’s mind was meditating on several psalms

What does this tell us?

- Jonah was a man who knew the Word of God well enough to remember it
- Jonah was a man who turned to the Word of God in this time of distress

Jonah’s prayer is convicting

- It is an exaltation of God
- It is an expression of gratitude to God
- It is a time of recommitment of his vows (2:9)

²¹ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 775.

²² Feinberg, 139.

This is hardly what we would expect, especially from such a rebellious prophet!

But the most important part of this prayer is given in the last part of verse 9, “**Salvation is from the LORD**”

- This prophet confesses and acknowledges that deliverance can only come from the LORD Himself
- He would soon see that truth lived out in his life and the lives of the Ninevites

It seems as if the LORD wanted to teach Jonah this lesson before he was released from the fish

- Now Jonah may have figured that he would never be released
- Perhaps he thought that this was the end of his life

But the LORD “**commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land**” (2:10)

- Once again, we see the authority of God over nature

III. **Jonah preaches (chapter 3)**

Amazingly enough, the LORD extends a second opportunity for Jonah to obey (3:1-2)

- And he does!

Nineveh was about 500 miles away

- It would have taken him quite a while to travel there
- It was an excellent time for him to think back on what had just transpired

The city of Nineveh was a huge city²³

- It was about 60 miles in circumference
- Its walls were 100 feet high (about 10 stories)
- The tops of the walls were wide enough to allow three chariots to ride abreast

Jonah’s message to these unbelieving Gentiles was simple, “**Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown**” (3:4).

- Just five words in the Hebrew Text

Imagine what Jonah must have looked like

- He had spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish
- Perhaps he was still smelling “ripe” from the fish’s stomach juices
- Perhaps his skin was bleached from the chemicals inside the stomach of the fish²⁴

²³ Feinberg, 143.

²⁴ Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, 259.

The result of this short message was that the entire city was converted

- “Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them” (3:5)

This preaching of Jonah to the Ninevites was used by the Lord Jesus Christ in His day, “And as the crowds were increasing, He began to say, ‘This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah.’³⁰ For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation” (Lk 11:29-30)

- The story of Jonah was well-known, even hundreds of years after the fact

The rest of the chapter chronicles the repentance that was seen in the lives of the Ninevites

- These unbelieving Gentiles were crying out to God
- The result was that God did not bring the destruction that He could have

IV. Jonah pouts (chapter 4)

Now we would like for the story to end at chapter 3

- Jonah was obedient
- The Ninevites repented
- *Ending on a good note, right?*

But the main point of Jonah would be missed if we stopped at chapter three

- This is why God gives us an insight peak at the life of His prophet
- Chapter four is basically a dialogue between the LORD and His prophet

What we see in verse 1 is shocking, “it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry”

- What?
- Jonah preached, the people believed, and he became angry?

He gives the reason why he is made in verse 2, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity”

Why did he become upset with the LORD?

- He knew that God would be compassionate
- He didn’t want God to be compassionate on these sinners!

Here is a prophet of God wanting to see God’s judgment brought down on these undeserving sinners

- Here is the prophet Jonah who is upset when God extends grace and compassion toward the Gentiles
- *Jonah is so upset that he asks God to take his life*

The Lord responds with a heart-probing question, “Do you have good reason to be angry?” (4:3)

- There is no answer given by Jonah

Jonah does get up and move outside the city of Nineveh to pout

- But God followed him!

The pouting prophet made a shelter for himself

- He didn't want to be too close to the Ninevites
- After all, they were Gentiles

This shelter would provide a good point-of-view to “see what would happen in the city” (4:5)

The LORD was about to teach Jonah a lesson that he would never forget

- God showed grace and compassion to Jonah in allowing “a plant” (4:6a) to grow and shade him from the sun
- “And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant” (4:6b)

But this happiness was short-lived

- “But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered” (4:7)
- Just as quickly as God had provided the plant, He took it away

“And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, ‘Death is better to me than life’” (4:8)

- God was removing His provision to allow the sun to beat down on Jonah
- Jonah “begged with all his soul to die”
- How sad!

For the second time, the LORD asked Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” (4:9a)

- This time, Jonah responded, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death” (4:9b)

Talk about a sad situation!

- Sinners are rescued from eternal damnation
- And the prophet is mad...to the point of death!

Here comes the LORD's lesson for Jonah in verse 10-11, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

- *Ouch!*

Jonah had compassion for a plant that was here today and gone tomorrow

- A plant has no soul
- A plant has no eternal value

Jonah didn't do anything to make that plant grow

- He simply enjoyed it while it lasted

The Lord is telling His prophet that He has a right and privilege to be compassionate toward unbelievers

- After all, He is the Creator of all men
- After all, had He not been extremely compassionate to Jonah himself?

These "120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand" probably refer to the children

- At such an early age, these little ones wouldn't have the discernment to know about sin, consequences, and salvation

But not only was God having compassion on these children, He was also having compassion on "many animals"

- He was not extending eternal salvation to them
- But as their Creator, God was extending compassion to them
- Otherwise, they would have perished if the city had been destroyed

How sad to see the repentance of a Gentile, pagan city upon hearing from one prophet²⁵

- And yet, how many prophets have we studied so far who were sent to the northern and southern kingdoms?
- How much genuine repentance had transpired?

Jesus Christ used this against the Pharisees (Matt 12:38-41; Lk 11:29-32)

- They didn't think they needed repentance
- But they were stubborn and hard-hearted!

What did Jonah learn?²⁶

- It is impossible to run from God
- There is no limit to what God will do in order to get his attention
- Failure does not disqualify him from being used of God
- Disobedience to God can cause some unusual consequences
- Love for God is more important than love of country

What are we to learn from this book?

- Here are a few examples that come to my mind

²⁵ MacArthur, 242.

²⁶ Wilkinson & Boa, 258.

1. **God will forgive anyone who repents²⁷**
 - a. This could be unbelieving Gentiles
 - b. Or this could be a believing prophet!
 - c. Repentance is not just a one-time event at conversion; it is an ongoing habit that should characterize us throughout our Christian lives

2. **God expects obedience from those who are His**
 - a. We can never give God perfect, total obedience because of our sin
 - b. But we should strive to be marked by, and characterized by, obedience
 - c. The fish, the wind and waves, the plant, the worm, the wind, and the sun all obeyed God
 - d. But it was the prophet of God who was the model of disobedience!

3. **God expects His people to be motivated to proclaim His message to unbelievers**
 - a. One writer says that Jonah is “[the great missionary book of the Old Testament](#)”²⁸
 - b. When was the last time that we honestly cared enough to proclaim the Gospel to an unbeliever around us?
 - c. Are we not like Jonah, sitting at the edge of the city, enjoying the comforts of God’s provisions?

4. **God’s compassion and concern reach farther than ours does**
 - a. We often put limits on how much we will love
 - b. “[God has always been more committed to reaching the world than his own people have been](#)”²⁹

5. **We need to examine where our priorities are**
 - a. We are often focused on self instead of God

6. **Are we genuinely grateful when God displays His grace against our enemies?**

7. **Are there certain people groups that you don’t particularly care for or like?³⁰**
 - a. African Americans?
 - b. Hispanics?
 - c. Muslims?
 - d. Iraqis?

We must be careful lest there be a Jonah-like mentality within our hearts as believers!

²⁷ Gerard Chrispin, *The Bible Panorama*, 374.

²⁸ Feinberg, 133.

²⁹ Dever, 786.

³⁰ Dever, 788.

“Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” (Rev 5:9)

- Praise God for His grace and compassion to every nation!
 - o Not just Nineveh
 - o But America as well!