

JONAH

INTRODUCTION

We are taking a little detour away from Isaiah into another prophet. He is the Reluctant Prophet Jonah. There is a natural break here in Isaiah and I think Jonah will provide us with some greater historical context to Isaiah as well as speak directly to us here and now.

NINEVEH AND ASSYRIA

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire and was a 3 day's journey across.

The Assyrians were exceedingly wicked, evil, and violent. They were quite proud of their wickedness and wrote about it in their own histories.

They would partially skin women and children that they conquered. They would then spread out their skins over the city walls. Some they would partially skin, bury alive in the sand and drive a stake through their tongues. They would leave them there alive as they died in horrible pain, dying of thirst.

They would rape and then kill little girls.

They impale soldiers alive outside the city gate. They would collect the heads of their enemies and pile them so high that they went over the top of the city gate as a warning to their enemies.

These are the people that threatened, and ultimately conquered the people of God.

Simply put, they were the Nazi Germany of this era and in some ways worse because they boasted in it.

JOB A GODLY MAN

II Kings 14:25 – he was one of Israel's respected prophets.

When Jonah prays to God from the belly of the fish, he extensively quotes the Psalms and other scripture.

He was a good, Godly man in every other way but this one thing. He was not a whiner or a rebel. He simply said no to God this one time.

We are all full of these contradictions. We obey God in every area but "this one". We are ok with Him leading us to a better job, health, oneness in marriage, etc. But there are always areas of our lives that we want for ourselves.

Jonah is no different.

GOD SPEAKS

READ Jonah 1

One day God doesn't give Jonah a word for the church on the corner where he gets a nice honorarium and a fellowship meal. God sends him to his worst enemy. Not only his worst enemy, but the worst enemy of the people of God. This would be the modern day equivalent to a Jew leaving home to be a missionary to Nazi Germany.

It was dangerous, impossible, and it would bring the ire and anger of his fellow countrymen.

From Jonah's perspective, God was simply being unreasonable.

JONAH FLEES

Jonah does exactly the opposite of what God told him. Tarshish is in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

I love that this first verse tells us that Jonah found a ship ready to go to Tarshish.

Pastor J.D. Greer points out in regards to Jonah that "when you want to run from God, there will always be a ship ready to take you away."

We all have the tendency to search for and find confirmation that we are doing right when we know that we are really rebelling against God. We are often lured into thinking that just because something works out in the short term that God must not care about our obedience as if we simply slipped one past Him, despite Him being GOD.

GOD PURSUES

Jonah doesn't get very far before God sends a storm to threaten the ship he is in, showing us that our disobedience is much bigger than ourselves, it always impacts others.

But God PROVIDES a big fish to swallow him up, bring him to repentance, and deposit him unceremoniously on the shores of his calling.

I can identify with this, as I'm sure all of you can. For me, the belly of the whale was a glue factory in Siler City, NC. Only certain kinds of towns have genuine glue factories, and Siler City was such a town.

God had called me, I went the opposite direction, and he sent a storm in the form of a scary Assistant Principal that found me to be a repugnant human being. That storm quickly deposited me in the belly of a whale of a glue factory filtering glue through a cheesecloth and scraping sticky drains.

JONAH OBEYS

READ Jonah 3:1-3

God then says it all again. It's as if all of that drama was a side trip and God is now repeating Himself as if to say, "Remember this, Jonah? I just said it the other day. Let's try this again, but this time try obeying me."

Does Jonah have a choice? Yes. Does he have a will? Yes. God gives Jonah a choice in the way the Godfather gives choices. You can do what I say, or you can swim with the fishes. It's up to you. It's your choice. And it's as if the Holy Spirit is there with you saying, "You know, if I was you, I'd just do what He says."

It is worth noting here that God doesn't give Jonah the message up front. He simply tells him to go and say what God says. The point here is that all God requires from us is obedience. We do not have to know what to say or what to do. All we need is to say yes and get up and start walking.

NINEVEH REPENTS

Jonah preaches in the city and tells them that Nineveh will be overthrown in 40 days. Note that there is no promise given here. Jonah does not tell them to repent and be spared. **He brings them a message of the hopeless judgment that they have more than earned in their wicked and violent persecution of so many people! Jonah has NOT come seeking their repentance, but simply announcing their doom.**

Yet they believe God and repent. God is pleased by their repentance and *defers* judgment.

Not long after this, they become worse than ever and about 100 years after Jonah God use the Babylonians to wipe them off the planet.

[NOTE: Even the most powerful civilization can disappear under God's hand. History is full of examples. It is the ultimate in arrogance to think that we are too big for God to discipline.]

JONAH'S FRUSTRATED RESPONSE

READ Jonah 4:1-11

This was not Jonah's plan. He wanted them to perish because for them to perish meant that his enemy would finally get justice. Jonah hated the Assyrians, and with good reason! **How could God let them off the hook!?**

SOME CONCLUSIONS

God points out to Jonah that he mourns over the death of his beloved shade, but does not mourn over the demise of 120,000 humans in Nineveh. If Jonah is upset about the plant that he had nothing to do with, why should God not be upset over 120,000 of His creation – wicked as they may be?

GREG MILSAPS:

"The more I read [Jonah], the more subversive it gets. It insists that your enemy (and therefore whom you to believe to be *God's* enemy) may be more open to God's redeeming love than you are. And the book ends not with a tidy conclusion but with a tough, theologically-piercing question: 'Should I (God) not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?' And, Biblically speaking, WHY should He?? After all, these were the Assyrians - the

bloodthirsty, hated pagan enemies of God's chosen covenant people! The book of Jonah destroys our biases and labels with the declaration that God is on *everyone's* side, extending grace and compassion to everyone - even to those whom our 'Biblical' theology clearly tells us are NOT on God's side and are therefore not deserving of His grace and mercy but only of His judgment and punishment.

The book of Jonah is not a safe book for religious people. Religious people have been very good over the years at seeing themselves as US and people that aren't a part of their group as THEM. But in this story, the man who sees himself as 'us' is furious because of how loving God has become with the other - the 'them.' In fact, when he finally gets it he's so furious he'd rather die than live with the dissonance that a loving God brings to his theology.

But what about us? Can we live with such a subversive and merciful God?"

The problem here is that Jonah has defined the world in the same way that Israel and Judah had in Isaiah. It was us and them. They had defined their enemies as "them" and the heroes as "us".

Jonah is upset that God didn't punish the "them" in his situation.

But God doesn't define things the way we do. With God it isn't about sinner and saint. It's about repentant and non-repentant. We define each other by our sins and our strengths. God looks at repentant and non-repentant. **Here we have Jonah, the righteous prophet and Nineveh the wicked, heathen, rebels. But who is repentant and who is not?**

Jonah is not repentant. Nineveh is. And God has mercy on "them".

Jonah's neat categories of "good people" and "bad people" get blown out of the water by God's categories of "repentant" and "non-repentant". The truly subversive question is: "Are your categories the same as God's categories?"

Nowhere are our false categories of "us" and "them" challenged than over the issue of forgiveness. In order to practice forgiveness, you must give up your categories of "us" and "them" and submit to God's categories. You have to, in essence, put yourself in the same category together under God.

[Corrie Ten Boom Story on Forgiveness]

THIS MESSAGE IS ALMOST TOO PROPHETIC

I think this is a very prophetic message. It's almost too prophetic, because right now most of us don't have real enemies. At least, no one that you would be so bold as to call an enemy. No Assyrians conquering us. No Nazis bent on genocide. No one pointing an AK47 at your head telling you to deny Christ.

Despite the obvious trends to the contrary, we still live in a cultural micro-climate in these small southern suburbs where everyone is very polite and gracious. Yet in most places in the United States right now what you and I believe about God, and the very nature of reality, is so thoroughly misunderstood and rejected that it is mocked or ignored at best. At worst it is considered bigotry. I know most of you aren't feeling this every day in Kernersville and Greensboro, but this really is where we are as a country.

LISTEN: American Christianity's greatest challenge over the next 50 years will not be to stand firm on our long held beliefs. It will not be to stare down the barrel of a gun and choose death over denying Christ. It will not be to fight in the courts for conservative morality. Our greatest challenge will be the challenge of Jonah. Whom and what will you mourn over? Will you mourn over the loss of Christianity's status in the culture, the loss of a Biblical definition of marriage, sexuality, and morality? Or will you mourn over the eternal decimation of the millions of people in this country that a generation from now will have been raised in a Godless culture.

I get the feeling sometimes that we are more upset about losing the comfortable shade that American Christendom has afforded us for the last century than we are about the 317 million of souls toppling into the open maw of hell. While we are complaining that Hollywood got Noah wrong, the country is wondering where the real Jesus went.

BE SUBVERSIVE

Jesus was subversive. In Matthew 9 (and other places) He spent so much time with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and drunkards that he was accused of being one Himself. When He was questioned, He didn't apologize or try to explain. He didn't step away from the sinner's table. He just said that He didn't come for the healthy, but the sick. He didn't come for the righteous, but the sinner. He didn't come for the found, but the lost.

Those are Jesus' categories. The minute you say, "I'm not sick, I'm well. I'm one of the good guys. I'm not 'them', I'm 'us' then Jesus says 'Then I didn't come for you'."

This is how we are to love others. We love them with desperation. We love them like we love each other. We invite them in, we eat with them, we reach out to them, we get close enough to them to lose our reputation. And when we are questioned, we do not make excuses or distance ourselves. We don't get up from the sinner's table.