

The Salvation of Jonah

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Introduction.

- A. Of all the stories that little kids learn in Bible class, it seems like there is none more fitting to the audience than the story of Jonah. There's just something about the idea of Jonah being swallowed whole by a great fish—which may or may not have been a whale—that captures the imagination of children. In fact it's almost surprising that there's not a famous children's song about Jonah, complete with hand motions.
- B. However, as appealing as this story may be to our children, there's a very grown-up message in the book of Jonah too. The story isn't just about Jonah's opportunity to learn about fish from the inside. Indeed, it's not even just about Jonah's mission to go preach to the unbelieving people of Nineveh. Instead, when you get right down to it, the book is about the relationship between Jonah and God. Just like we today are fallible human beings, Jonah was a fallible human being, indeed, a human being who failed, and the book of Jonah is really a chronicle of God's efforts to bring Jonah from where he was to where God wanted him to be. Although none of us have ever been swallowed whole before, this story is our story too, because God is working in our lives just as He was in Jonah's. Let's turn our attention, then, to this story, which is really not about the salvation of Nineveh, but about the salvation of Jonah.

I. Summons & Response.

- A. This story begins with a summons that God gives to Jonah, and with Jonah's response to that summons. We see both in Jonah 1:1-3. Here's what's going on. God wants Jonah to go preach in the city of Nineveh, which is the capital of Assyria, a city hundreds of miles to the northeast of Israel. Instead, Jonah goes to the Philistine seaport of Joppa, gets on a boat, and sets sail for the city of Tarshish. Basically, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah responds by doing exactly the opposite.
- B. From the Biblical record, we can come up with a pretty good idea of why Jonah did this. Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, in the eighth century B.C., and during that time, the Assyrians were among the most bitter enemies of Israel. Jonah didn't want to go preach to these people not because he feared for his life, but because he feared that they would repent of their wickedness and God wouldn't destroy them. Jonah hated the Assyrians and refused to do anything that might cause them to be spared.
- C. Basically, Jonah refused to obey God because of a lack of respect for God's power and a lack of compassion for Israel's enemies. This lack of compassion is highlighted by what happens during Jonah's sea voyage. As he's sailing along, hoping to escape "from the presence of the Lord," a huge storm comes up and threatens to sink the ship, killing Jonah along with all the heathen sailors who are also on board. These sailors pray to their gods, then draw lots and discover from the lots that Jonah is the source of the trouble. We see the story pick up in Jonah 1:11-14. Even though they know that Jonah is the source of this storm that is endangering their lives, they continue to risk the ship to save his life. They have compassion on Jonah even though he is a foreigner who worships a strange god. What would Jonah have done in their shoes? At a guess, Jonah would have had them over the side before they finished talking.
- D. Now, it's awfully easy for us to shake our fingers at Jonah, but we need to ask ourselves how much this unflattering character sketch applies to us too. Just like Jonah, we have been commanded to preach. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 applies to each one of us. What do we do about it? Do we try to save souls, or do we try to flee just like Jonah did? Now, few of us try to escape to the coast of Africa, but almost all of us have, at one time or another, tried to escape through our excuses. I was talking to a brother recently about evangelism, and he commented that he saw himself more as being good at helping out troubled Christians than at bringing new souls to Christ, and so he didn't feel the need to evangelize. That's just one excuse; there are probably thousands more, but let's be blunt about what these excuses are. They are rationalizations that we use to justify our willful disobedience to a commandment of God. How do you think God feels about that? We all need to be people who are committed to evangelism. This doesn't mean that we all have to go set up on Mars Hill and preach mighty sermons to the lost, but it does mean that in our everyday lives, as we have opportunity, we need to try to bring our families and friends to Christ.

II. The Power of God.

- A. Because of Jonah's refusal to serve God in the way that God desired, Jonah is next treated to a firsthand demonstration of the power of God. The great storm that God has stirred up is by now quite evidently going to destroy the ship unless Jonah walks the plank. We see what the mariners do about it in Jonah 1:15-17.
- B. For some reason, this story seems to stir the outrage of skeptics and atheists everywhere. They get outraged that we believe that Jonah rode around in this fish's belly for three days and three nights. However, apparently, this is something that can even happen without miraculous intervention. I have read about the

story of a whaler who, with the rest of his shipmates, was hunting whales off the coast of South America. In the course of this expedition, this particular whaler fell into the water and was swallowed by a sperm whale. Three days later, the ship's crew tracked down the sperm whale and killed it. As they were cutting up the whale, they discovered the lost man in the whale's stomach. His hands and face had been bleached white by the whale's stomach acid, he was unconscious, but he was alive, just like Jonah.

- C. At any rate, Jonah is now residing within the belly of this great fish, whether it was a whale or not. Perhaps not surprisingly, Jonah begins to pray. We see the climax of this prayer described in Jonah 2:7-10. Jonah was certainly not an unbeliever before his unexpected undersea voyage, but now he REALLY believes. He knows that God has complete control over his life, and he knows that he is responsible to obey God in everything. As he says, "Salvation is of the Lord," both for him and for everyone else. Once Jonah realizes this, God knows that the great fish has accomplished his purpose, and Jonah is vomited out on dry land.
- D. This physical demonstration of the power of God was enough to convince Jonah to obey, but all of us who are Christians have experienced a similar, but even more impressive demonstration of God's spiritual power. God's capabilities are so great that He could have a hundred men swallowed by great fishes before breakfast without even breaking a sweat. However, God had to sacrifice His own Son to save mankind from its sins, and that unimaginable power is the power that we tap into when we are baptized. Friends, all of us who are Christians know firsthand about the life-changing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. That's a power we need to share.

III. The Reluctant Savior.

- A. Next, we see Jonah, fresh from the belly of the fish, in the role of reluctant savior. God speaks to him again in Jonah 3:1-3. Even though Jonah responded to God's first command to preach to Nineveh by doing the opposite, God gives Jonah exactly the same command again. Here's what this tells us about God:
 - 1. First of all, it tells us that God is very generous with second chances. I suspect that somewhere in the nations of Israel and Judah, there was a man who had done better in his service to God than Jonah had. Nonetheless, despite his previous failure, God wanted Jonah to try again. The same is true for us.
 - 2. Second, though, it says that wants His people to obey. Jonah didn't get a free pass on preaching to the Ninevites. Instead, God still expected Jonah to do what He said. This is true for us too. We may look back on our lives and realize that we've failed God by not working as hard as we should to bring others to Him. That's regrettable, but we can make it right by repenting. On the other hand, once we repent, God expects us to make up for lost time by getting out there and doing what we can to save the lost.
- B. So, in obedience to the Lord's command, off goes Jonah to Nineveh, this huge city, and he goes through the city for a day's walk warning them that in forty days they are going to be overthrown for their evil deeds. Despite his fish experience, I can't imagine that Jonah was the world's most eager preacher. Nevertheless, we see the results of his message in Jonah 3:5-6. An entire city full of pagans repents and mourns before God. Even the king of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and ashes. Later, we learn that because of this overwhelming repentance, God changes His plans about destroying Nineveh and allows the city to continue to exist.
- C. What can we take from this? Well, it tells us something important about the lifesaving power of the word of God. In Jonah's day, it got the results that God wanted, even though those WEREN'T the results that Jonah wanted to get. Now, we might feel that we aren't the most capable evangelists out there, but if we want the lost to be saved, just that gives us a leg up on Jonah. Let's not worry so much about ourselves and our capabilities, and just put our trust in the power of the gospel of Christ.

IV. The Plant.

- A. In the last act of the book of Jonah, things take a bizarre turn with the story of a plant. Jonah gives his reaction to the salvation of Nineveh in Jonah 4:1-4. Jonah is furious with God because He spared the repentant Ninevites, just like Jonah was afraid He would. Although God's compassion is the only reason Jonah is still alive, he's furious about the compassion God has shown the Assyrians. The story goes on to reveal that Jonah camps out above the city, hoping that he's changed God's mind and that God will wipe the city out.
- B. What happens next, though, is quite different. God causes a plant to sprout next to Jonah's shelter and grow up to shade Jonah. Before Jonah gets too comfortable, though, God sends a worm that kills the plant. Once again, Jonah gets mad and asks God to kill him. We see God's response in Jonah 4:9-11. He's teaching Jonah about the last thing that Jonah needs to get—compassion. Jonah mourns for a little plant that dies, yet he's actively rooting for a whole huge city to get wiped out. God's point is that compassion is for everyone.
- C. Of all we've looked at, this is THE lesson that we need to get from the book of Jonah. We need to be soul-winners, but we need to seek the lost out of the compassion that makes us WANT to be soul-winners. We need to look at the world through God's eyes. Jonah didn't want to save the Ninevites because they were enemies of God's people. It may be that there are people we aren't willing to work to save, because we don't like them or we're convinced that they're the enemies of God's people too. If that's our mindset, we need to change it. We need to love everyone, and work actively to save them, because salvation is for everyone too.

Conclusion. If you need to seek God's compassion and salvation in some way, come to Him today.