

Jonah

M. W. Bassford, 7-11-10

A couple of weeks ago, when I was over at the Bunches' house, Josh came to me with a question. He said that Jill wanted to know which Bible story was my favorite. Many of you have heard me preach for several years now, you've heard me identify probably hundreds of different passages as being among my favorites, so you have some idea of how impossible this question was for me to answer. I asked a couple of questions of my own to narrow down the scope of what Jill wanted to know, thought about it, and eventually concluded that my favorite was the story of Jonah. According to 2 Kings 14, Jonah was a prophet who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, like Hosea and Amos, and the book of Jonah recounts the story of God's command to him to go to the city of Nineveh and urge the people to repent.

I doubt that Jill had any trouble understanding my answer, because Jonah gets as much of the spotlight in our children's classes as any story in the Bible. We even have songs about it. For my own part, I was so young when I learned the story of Jonah that I can't even remember the first time I heard it.

This simple, kid-friendly narrative might lead us to conclude that there isn't much in the book of Jonah for grownups, but that simplicity is deceptive. We can easily grasp the story itself, but we must think much more deeply to figure out why God is telling the story in the first place. It isn't just the flashy tale of Jonah's encounter with a great fish; in fact, when we tell the fish story to our children, we usually leave out the most important part of the book. If anything, the book is the story of the wisdom and mercy of God, of how He can accomplish His will and reveal His mercy with a simple request and a few timely miracles. Let's ponder these timeless topics as we look at the book of Jonah.

Jonah's Flight and Deliverance.

The book opens with the description of Jonah's flight in Jonah 1:1-16. This portion of the story is at once an assertion of man's free will and a presentation of how God is able to use even the bad decisions that we make for His purposes. Let's look at the free-will part of this to start with. From the very first two verses of the chapter, it's obvious what God wants. He wants Jonah to go preach to the wicked people of Nineveh, not just to taunt them before He wipes them out, but so that they will repent and He can spare them. This is perfectly in line with the Biblical presentation of a God who desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, as in 1 Timothy 2. Jonah, however, even though he is a prophet of God, isn't on board with God's plan. Instead of going to Nineveh, he takes ship for Tarshish. We don't know where exactly Tarshish was, but Jonah thought it was as far from Nineveh and God as he could get.

If man doesn't have free will, this passage makes no sense. Why would God work against His desire to save Nineveh by manipulating His puppet Jonah to disobey Him? That would make the house of God a house divided, which no less authority than Jesus says cannot stand. Clearly, Jonah, not God, chose the direction he headed. Likewise, as people today, all of us have free will. Sometimes making the right choice can be difficult. All of us are more vulnerable to some temptations than to others. However, we can always make that right choice, and it's what God expects.

That brings us to the question, then, of why God chose Jonah in the first place. We know that men like Hosea and Amos were active at about the same time, and I'm sure Hosea would have preferred going to Nineveh to marrying Gomer. God knew that Jonah would, at least initially, be disobedient. So why pick him? I think the answer is that God knew that He could turn even Jonah's disobedience to His glory. Just consider the effect that Jonah had on the crew of the ship he was on. These sailors were unabashed pagans. When the storm began, each of them called out to his own god, and they woke Jonah up in the first place so that Jonah could add his god to the roster. However, the failure of all of those idols to save them revealed just how impotent they were, and the casting of the lot revealed that Jonah's God was the true God. In fact, when last we see these sailors, they fear the Lord exceedingly and are offering sacrifices to Him. Even before the Ninevites repent, God's command to Jonah leads to the repentance of these seamen as well.

In short, no matter how Jonah tried, he couldn't circumvent the will of God, and neither can we. We can always choose whether we are going to obey or disobey, but no matter what we do, in some way or other, God is going to be glorified. God is immeasurably wiser than we are, and He is an immeasurably better planner. He knows what we're going to do before we do it, and, just as with the Jews who crucified Jesus, He can make even our disobedience serve His purposes. If we remain disobedient, it may be that we glorify Him by providing an example to others of the damage sin will do to their lives. It may be that we will only glorify Him on the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Regardless, God is going to win. We only choose whether we're going to win too.

Jonah, then, has been tossed into the raging sea, and we see his deliverance presented in Jonah 1:17-2:10. This is a story that Bible haters love to hate on. They think it's absurd that a man could be swallowed by a fish and live inside it for three days and nights. There are two logical problems with that. In the first place, nothing is impossible with God. A God who can give life to the dead can just as easily keep a man alive inside a fish. In the second place, the Jonah story is

possible even without miraculous intervention. The 1941 *Princeton Theological Review* records the story of a British sailor on a whaling ship who was swept overboard and swallowed by a sperm whale. When another whaler captured and cut up the sperm whale three days later, they discovered the sailor in the whale's stomach, unconscious but alive. There is nothing at all about the Jonah story that should lead us to question our faith. It should lead us to glorify God instead.

Ultimately, that's what Jonah learns to do during his time-out in the belly of the fish. In fact, the bulk of the second chapter is made up of Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving for God's mercy and power. What's interesting about this prayer is that Jonah prays it even before he touches dry land again. In fact, as the text presents it, Jonah's prayer is the very reason why the fish vomits Jonah out at all. God wasn't going to let Jonah out until Jonah reached that point.

In the same way, it is often true in our own lives that God waits to bless us until we have learned enough to appreciate the blessing. In my own life, I can't help but think of how long it took me to get married. Lauren and I only tied the knot when I was 26, and by that point in my life, I'd already been looking to get married for a number of years. I prayed about it constantly, I did everything I could think of to make it happen, but nothing worked. In retrospect, it's obvious that God didn't let me get married because I wasn't ready to get married. I still had a lot of growing up to do, and God wasn't willing to let me get hitched until I'd matured enough to be a semi-decent husband. For all of us, whenever we want something and it keeps just not happening, we need to stop and ask ourselves what God is trying to teach us where we are. Only as we absorb that lesson can we move onward into the joys that He has planned.

The Salvation of Nineveh and Jonah.

We see the further progression of God's plans in Jonah 3:1-10. God commands Jonah to go preach to Nineveh, and, having learned at least something from prior experience, this time he goes. At this time, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, an empire centered in present-day northern Iraq, and they were enemies of the Israelites. At this stage of history, the Assyrians were in the middle of conquering the Arameans, and they were just about to start on the southern nations of Palestine. Even by the brutal standards of the day, the Assyrians were a cruel people. Isaiah 7 describes the desolation that the Assyrians are about to bring to Israel. And yet, God sends Jonah to these people to urge them to repent, and they do repent. Even the animals are made to fast and wear sackcloth. Because of this repentance, God resolves not to destroy Assyria, and the nation continues on for another hundred years until the Babylonians wipe them out.

This only emphasizes a message that is common throughout Scripture. It's not up to us to decide who gets to hear the word of the Lord, because we can never tell who is going to repent. Even a vicious people like the Assyrians, who thrived on bloodshed and conquest, could be turned from their wickedness. We may have people in our lives who are just as wicked in other ways, but we need to give God's word the chance to work in their hearts as well.

So, then, at the beginning of the final chapter of Jonah, God is happy, the Ninevites are happy, but Jonah, whose preaching caused all of this, isn't happy. Jonah 4:1-11 explains. As Jonah says here, he didn't originally try to flee to Tarshish because he was afraid of the Assyrians, or even of failure. He was afraid of success, that his mission would be successful, and that God would spare these enemies of his people. Everything went according to Jonah's fears, and now, unlike the countless preachers throughout history who have become embittered because no one listened, Jonah becomes embittered because everyone listened. He's so angry that he demands that God take his life, and when God refuses, he camps out on the hills overlooking Nineveh, hoping to manipulate God into destroying the city after all.

All of this highlights how deeply flawed Jonah is and how much he still has to learn from God. Jonah was a rebel, no doubt about it. He ran as hard as he could to avoid obeying God, and he was only saved because of God's mercy despite his sin. He even expressed thanks for his salvation. Now, however, he doesn't want the people of Nineveh to enjoy the same mercy that saved his life. We too sometimes need to remember our situation and avoid the hard and merciless heart of Jonah. Before we get too eager to condemn another, we need to recall God's grace to us.

God addresses Jonah's hardheartedness with a deft miracle designed to change His erring prophet's perspective. As Jonah is baking on the Assyrian hillside, God causes a plant to spring up in a single night and grow large enough to shade him, so that his angry vigil is slightly more tolerable. However, just as God raised the plant up in a night, He kills the plant in a night, and Jonah is back to baking. Predictably, his self-centered messenger resents this. Before Jonah had begged to die because Nineveh was going to be spared. Now, he's begging to die because his plant wasn't spared. God asks him, "Is the plant really that big a deal?" Jonah responds with an emphatic "Yes!" That's when God springs His trap. He asks Jonah, "If you have so much pity for this plant, which was only around for a day, in which you invested nothing, then shouldn't I also have pity on a city of more than 120,000?" With that question, the book ends.

It's easy for us to fall into the same self-centered thinking as Jonah, to care about things only to the extent that they affect us. As Mel Brooks once said, "Tragedy is when I stub my toe; comedy is when you fall down a manhole and die." We can live our lives like that. We can go through existence wrapped in our own self-centered little bubble, keenly aware of our own needs and wants, but indifferent to everyone else's. That's the opposite of who God wants us to be. We need to be better than Jonah. We need to take God's love and mercy for everyone and make it our own too.