

JONAH

As we turn our thoughts to the document of Jonah I want to say emphatically that the story of the prophet Jonah is much more than a whale-of-a tale! If the fish story is all that one knows about Jonah then they really know nothing about Jonah.

There are three places that people generally find themselves regarding the document of Jonah. Those in the first place dismiss it as ridiculous—because of the whale, or more accurately the big fish. Those in the second place spend all their time defending the whale account as proof of their orthodoxy. Those in the third place read and hear the entire story for what it is that God might be trying to teach God’s people. I would encourage you not to get bogged down and distracted by whether we are to understand this story as allegory, parable, or factual history.

The story of Jonah begins with God giving instructions to Jonah—traveling instructions. *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”* Jonah is a prophet whose job it is to share the word of God. God gives Jonah an assignment to go but Jonah says, *“No!”* So the document of Jonah begins with Jonah in defiance of God and on the run! The text reads that he is running from the *“presence of God.”* Jonah goes to Joppa and hops a ship to Tarshish—in the southern region of Spain. The most distant point in the world at that time.

While at sea a terrible storm arises. The professional sailors are doing all they can to keep the ship from breaking apart and sinking yet their efforts are not working. They are all afraid for their lives. In the midst of the storm Jonah confesses that he is running from God and he says to the sailors, *“Throw me into the sea and then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”* Jonah interprets the storm as God’s punishment upon him. Now remember, Jonah is running from the presence of God. I guess he has not gone far enough yet! Or, is it that there is no *“far enough”* because one cannot escape the presence of God? I will leave that with you to think further about.

The sailors throw Jonah into the sea, just as he requests, and sure enough the storm ceases and the scripture reads, *“And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”* Thus ends the first chapter of the document of Jonah.

The second chapter consists of Jonah praying from inside the fish. What else do you do when you are inside of a fish? Certainly he is going to pray—he is in crises! What I want to know is how long does it take to get that fish smell off after three days and three nights?

Jonah’s prayer consists of him describing what it was like when he was drowning in the sea. And in his prayer he acknowledges that he calls out to God

while he is drowning and that God delivers him—providing the great fish, or what has commonly been thought of as a whale. He also states in prayer how religious he is. He reminds God that he does not worship idols and that he regularly offers sacrifices and keeps his promise to pay his vows. He is reminding God how good he is! The document then reads, *“And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”* Paul Keim in a 2003 article in *The Christian Century* translates it this way, *“From the belly of the whalelike fish, Jonah delivers a prayer so lousy with pious platitudes that the poor sea creature pukes him up onto dry land.”* It sounds like Keim believes the whale literally got sick of Jonah! Thus ends chapter two.

Chapter three of the document of Jonah begins with, *“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’”*

This is the very same message that God gave to Jonah to begin with; the very same message that caused Jonah to run from the presence of God. Since that time Jonah has been in a terrible storm, thrown from a ship, nearly drowned, swallowed by a fish, spent three nights and days inside that fish, and then was vomited out. It appears that God is wondering if any of this has gotten Jonah’s attention. This kind of reminds me of the Verizon television ad where the guy is walking on the beach saying, *“Can you hear me now?”*

The scripture reads, *“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the lord!”* Apparently, he does now hear! Jonah finally does what it is he has been running from doing. Wouldn’t you!

In the streets, and the gathering places of Nineveh, Jonah preaches over and over, *“Yet, forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!”* His message consists only of judgment and destruction upon Nineveh; there is no room for mercy. Jonah proclaims only that God will destroy the city because of its wickedness! The strangest thing then happens according to the 5th verse of the third chapter of the document of Jonah, *“The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”* Friends, the entire city of Nineveh repents of their sin and their evil ways. The entire city! Jonah’s mission has been successful! And the final verse of this chapter reads, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which He had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.”* God shows mercy and compassion upon the people of Nineveh! Thus ends the third chapter.

What preacher would not be ecstatic over such a response as that which Jonah receives in Nineveh? Yet, the fourth and final chapter of the document begins, *“It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”* Why? Why is Jonah angry? Well we do not have to make any suppositions about this. The reason is stated

clearly by Jonah in a prayer to God. **(READ 4:2b)**

Jonah is angry because God is merciful and compassionate towards the people of Nineveh. Jonah wants the Ninevites to experience the wrath and anger of God. Jonah wants to see them squirm! He wants to see the people of Nineveh destroyed. And he is angry at God because God has forgiven them! And the reason he initially refused to go to Nineveh is because he knew this is what God would do. And he did not want to have any part of it!

Why is it that Jonah is so angry towards the people of Nineveh? Because they are a mean cruel people. This is especially true regarding the Jews. They exploit the Jews. They make fun of the Jews. They use and humiliate the Jews. Jonah being a good faithful Jew wants nothing to do with these horrible outrageous cruel heathen people. He wants them to get what is coming to them! He believes in the concept of “what goes around comes around” but he knows that God will have none of this! Jonah knows that God does not give people what they deserve instead God offers compassion and mercy. And Jonah is as mad and hot as hell at God for doing this. In fact Jonah is so mad that he says to God, *“I beg you to take my life from me. It is better for me to die than to witness this atrocity!”* What atrocity? His enemies, the people of Nineveh, experiencing the mercy and compassion of God. He would rather die than see it!

I want now to read the final verses of the document of Jonah. **(Read 4:5-11)** Thus ends the story of Jonah! Except that unfortunately the spirit of Jonah lives on! What spirit is that? It is the spirit of desiring mercy from God for oneself, or one’s own kind, while demanding the justice of God for others.

Jonah grieves over the death of a plant that he has nothing to do with creating or growing or even sustaining—he grieves at its loss because it provides him with comfort. God says to Jonah, *“Should I not pity Nineveh?”* God grieves over the sad state of the people of Nineveh because he has created them for better than they are living. They are His creation and it is His desire to save them not to destroy them. Should He not have pity on them—on His own creation?

The spirit of Jonah lives on every time I pray for revenge or for destruction of a people that I consider my enemy. It is as if I take my seat along side Jonah and wait; hoping and praying that God will come to His senses and destroy the city of Nineveh. You see, Nineveh is the place where people live who we think are beyond God’s grace. It could be a prison. It could be a country. It could be an ideology. It could be a religion. But the truth is that none of creation is beyond God’s love and compassion. God’s desire and motivation is to deliver, to rescue, to save, to comfort, to heal and to make whole.

The spirit of Jonah lives on when we refuse to offer mercy to those who we believe do not deserve it. The spirit of Jonah lives on when we, the people of God, try to act and sound more righteous than God!

So who is it that you (I) do not want God to love? Who is it that you (I) do not want God to show compassion towards? Whoever your answer is—that's your Nineveh!

Time inside of the great fish persuades Jonah to go to Nineveh but it does not change his heart or mind about the people of Nineveh. Jonah prays to die because, according to him, the wrong kinds of people are experiencing God's mercy and grace. Unlike Jesus, who freely gives his life, is willing to die, on behalf of all people—even those in Nineveh—even those in your Nineveh and those in mine!