

Jonah: *Pursued by Grace*

Jonah 1:1

When I was a small child, remember my parents hosting a Bible study in their home. They invited a handful of young couples to join them, and before long the Bible study grew into a church plant. For the first several years, the young congregation met in the basement of a rented building called “The Odd Fellows Hall.” My earliest childhood memories include setting up the old, wooden chairs in rows, the smell of fresh brewed coffee, and listening to the bright young church planter who preached with the assistance of an overhead projector. But my most vivid memory of that time was sitting in a refrigerator box that had been carved into the shape of a whale. (show pic of Jim in the whale). I was dressed in a robe and held a small flashlight up to my face so I could deliver my lines. I was Jonah...the man who ran from God and was swallowed by a great fish.

The story of Jonah is one of the most popular, well-known stories in all the Bible. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all claim Jonah as part of their sacred texts, and the story is known around the world by people from all religions and walks of life. The Jews continue to read Jonah each year at *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, and scholars around the world continue to publish mountains of literature about Jonah. However, if you are a millennial, you probably remember Jonah as a VeggieTales classic from 2002 (show pic of Jonah movie)!

Having recently journeyed through the theological gold mine of Ephesians, I suspect many of you are now asking: “Why Jonah?” Jonah seems to be a remarkable contrast to the profound teaching of the Apostle Paul, right? Let me speak to your question right here at the start.

The book of Jonah has more power, more theological insight, and more relevance to this hour in history than you might imagine. I have chosen Jonah as our next expository journey precisely because we are in an election year...a time when intense nationalism tends to creep into the church and people begin to take sides. Jonah addresses toxic nationalism.

I have chosen Jonah because the temptation for Christians to withdraw from the culture gets stronger every day, and Jonah speaks to God’s heart for those who are perishing.

I have chosen Jonah because we regularly live in the tension of God’s perfect justice and God’s perfect mercy, and the book of Jonah speaks to this tension.

I have chosen Jonah because we all tend to get angry with God when He doesn’t fit our preferred version of the god we have created in our own image, and the story of Jonah reveals the real God who doesn’t play by our rules.

I have chosen Jonah because many of us hear God’s call and yet we run in the opposite direction because we don’t trust God’s intentions for our lives. The story of Jonah speaks to those of us who are running from God.

I could go on and on...and I likely will...so deal with it! We’re going to take our sweet time in a book consisting of only 48 verses! And here is my prediction: you will be delighted, surprised, convicted, and inspired by the story of Jonah in ways you never anticipated. So, bring your pain, bring your doubt, bring your disappointments, bring your biases, bring your fears...and bring a friend. Commit to walking through this timeless story and discover what the book of Jonah so clearly reveals: we have a God who pursues us with His grace! Regardless of where you are in life, the story of Jonah reminds us that God has not turned His face away...not even when we have been scoundrels...not even when we have failed to believe in Him. God’s mercy is greater than all our sin--and that is good news indeed.

So, with no further ado, please stand and let us read together Jonah 1:1 “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai...”

The remainder of my message will address three obvious questions: 1) Who was Jonah? 2) History or Parable? and 3) What to Make of the Whale?

I. Who was Jonah?

The only identifier that we find in the entire book of Jonah is that he was “the son of Amittai.” The story of Jonah doesn’t say anything about Jonah serving as a prophet of the Lord, nor does it give us any kind of a timestamp. Lucky for us, we know a little bit more about Jonah, when and where he served as a prophet, and what was going on in Israel during the time of his service from a brief reference in 2 Kings 14:23-28:

²³In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. ²⁵He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. ²⁶For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. ²⁷But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.²⁸Now the rest of the acts of Jeroboam and all that he did, and his might, how he fought, and how he restored Damascus and Hamath to Judah in Israel, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel? ²⁹

OK, so what did we learn?

First of all, the prophet’s name, “Jonah, son of Amittai” literally translates “Dove, son of faithfulness.”¹ A *yona* was a homing bird or a dove, and it is a term used multiple times in Hosea (11:11 and 7:11) and again by the Psalmist who writes:

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, ‘O, that I had wings like a “yona”! I would fly away and be at rest; yea, I would lodge in the wilderness, I would haste to find me a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.

¹ See [The Message of Jonah](#) by Rosemary Nixon; IVP, p 31.

Ironic, right? We must remember that there is always more to a name than meets the eye when we are reading the Bible.

Next, we learn that Jonah hailed from the town of Gath-hepher. Gath-hepher is also referred to in Joshua 19:13, and it was thought to be situated on the border of Zebulun and Naphtali (show map²), a few miles northeast of Nazareth. Given that Jesus was raised in Nazareth, we can assume that the fame and legend of Jonah was spoken of regularly in his childhood setting.

We also learn that Jonah, the son of Amittai, was indeed a prophet of God who served under the reign of Jeroboam II, which dates Jonah as serving sometime between 781-746 BC. During that time, Jonah played a role in securing the northern border of Israel against the growing super-power of Assyria. Lebo-hamath represented the northern border of Israel and Assyria, and of course, Nineveh was one of the leading cities of Assyria.

Keep in mind that our passage in II Kings also reveals that times were very hard in 8th century Israel. In vs. 26 we read, “For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel...so He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.”

Do you see the situation? Jonah was a prophet and a true patriot of Israel. He would have been remembered as a national hero for his supporting role in helping King Jeroboam II reinforce their northern borders.

This is why historical context is critical for understanding the scriptures. The original ancient readers or hearers of the book of Jonah would have been familiar with Jonah, the son of Amittai, the 8th century patriot and hero who defended Israel from invasion. We must have that same perspective when we come to read the book of Jonah to appreciate why Jonah would completely defy God’s call to go to Nineveh.

OK, so we now know a bit more about Jonah. Let us move to our next question...

II. History or Parable?

When we read the book of Jonah, it sounds nothing like the kind of history we read a minute ago in II Kings 14, right? There is no mention of King Jeroboam II. There is no mention of Jonah’s office. There is no mention of what was going on at the time in Israel. In fact, there is no word from the Lord to Israel whatsoever...and least not directly! Unlike other OT books of prophecy, the story of Jonah is remarkably personal. The information regarding God’s call, the events on the ship, his time in the belly of the fish, and his conversations with God could have only come from one source: Jonah himself.

²

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c2/12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg/800px-12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg.png

And then the story is so utterly counter-intuitive. Jonah is not called to go to God's chosen people Israel...he is called to leave his people and prophecy to Israel's enemy. In every instance, the pagans are more responsive and more likely to demonstrate faith in God than Israel's famous prophet! To say it plainly, Jonah does not read like the other ancient prophetic texts. Jonah is closer in form to the book of Job. Both Job and Jonah may be literal, historical events, but historical accuracy would not be required for us to learn from these stories because the intent of both authors is to point to something far more meaningful than the record of historical events.

So, let us revisit the question: is Jonah to be read as history or parable? My answer would simply be: yes! Both.

We must first attempt to read Jonah through the perspective of the original, ancient audience. Since Jonah was a known prophet as recorded in II Kings 14, the setting of the story is and must always remain in 8th century Israel. Nineveh was a famous city, and the Assyrians were a famously ruthless people, so we must not remove this story from its historical setting as though the historical events were unimportant. The story is told as a series of historical events that took place, so we must read it as a historical account to understand and appreciate its teaching value.

On the other hand, we should not look to Jonah as an interpretation of historical events akin to I and II Kings and I and II Chronicles. We should not attempt to read Jonah like we would read Isaiah or Jeremiah who were clearly speaking on God's behalf to God's people in times of crisis. The writer of Jonah is telling a story about God's sovereignty, God's mercy, God's justice, and God's immeasurable grace for a wide variety of people, and particularly the misfit messenger named Jonah. Though the historical setting is critical for understanding the story, the value of Jonah is very akin to the value of parables taught by Jesus in the New Testament. Jonah's teaching value is timeless, complex, challenging, and even a bit unresolved...very much like our Lord's parable about the father who had two sons or the surprising intervention of a Samaritan after well-respected Jewish leaders failed to show mercy to a man left for dead. Parables consist of stories that could have very well happened in history, but the value of the parable is not dependent upon the historical veracity of the events. Such is the case with Jonah.

So...allow me to summarize my answer to this question. The story of Jonah may be, and many believe it is in fact, historically accurate. I have no problem reading the events in Jonah as historically accurate, and I will show you very good reasons to conclude that the book of Jonah is, at least to some extent, based upon actual historical events. At the same time, whoever wrote the book of Jonah was anointed by the Holy Spirit and wrote in such a way to make this story a timeless treasure of truth that reaches into the soul of the reader and reveals powerful lessons that continue to point us to the Gospel. Jonah reveals our sinful nature, and Jonah points us to Jesus. In that respect, the book of Jonah has the power and timeless value of a parable.

OK, I will leave you in the tension of history and parable because the text leaves us in that tension...and I look forward to your emails tomorrow!

Let us look now at our third and final question...

III. What to Make of the Whale?

Whenever we think of the story of Jonah, what is the first image that comes to mind? The whale, right? Children LOVE the story of Jonah and the whale, and that's the way most of us came to know this story. That is obviously how I came to know this story!

Regrettably, the "whale" has oftentimes upstaged the profound value of Jonah, so we must take a moment to address this question, "What are we to make of the whale?"

Well, first of all, let us be accurate in acknowledging that the writer of Jonah does not mention a whale, but writes in 1:17, "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." The Hebrew word for "whale" is different than the Hebrew word for "fish"; but, to be fair, we can hardly imagine any fish big enough to swallow a full-grown man if not for a whale, so it's perfectly acceptable for you to keep that whale in your imagination. But then we get stuck, right? We start asking reasonable questions like: "How did Jonah survive for three days and nights in the belly of a great fish/whale? How could he breathe? What's it like in the belly of a whale? Aren't there stomach acids or such that would make him deteriorate? Did he have anything to eat or drink in there? How could a whale or a great fish vomit up a human being onto dry land?"

When we're kids, we just accept that God can do anything, so the whale is fun but not distracting. However, as critical-thinking adults, some of us simply cannot get past the great fish. We simply cannot make ourselves believe that a full-grown man survived within a great fish or a whale and then was burped out alive three days later. In fact, since we find that part of the story so offensively unbelievable, we are inclined to dismiss the entire book of Jonah as a made-up story for children. Even more troubling are those who dismiss the entire Bible as fiction because of this reference to Jonah in the belly of the great fish. So...let's deal with the fish before we even get started on our journey through Jonah.

First of all, I think we can all agree that if Jonah did, in fact, get swallowed by a great fish or a whale, and if he did survive for three days and then got spit out on dry ground, it was only by the miraculous intervention of *God*...correct? That is what the text says: The *LORD* appointed a great fish. By virtue of God's supernatural power and involvement in this event, we should not be looking for evidence that a man could actually survive for three days in the belly of a whale! Of course a man would not survive in the belly of a whale for three days under any normal or natural circumstances! But this event is not ordinary, it is extra-ordinary. The event is not described as natural, but as super-natural. In other words, Jonah's survival is a miraculous event orchestrated by God's all-powerful hand. If God can create the universe, including men and women and whales...it stands to reason that God can appoint a great fish to swallow a man, and God can keep that man alive, and God can have that man spit out on dry ground according to His command...because God is God, and God can do those kinds of things. The fact that God does not ordinarily use whales to swallow up disobedient prophets does not mean He never did,

right? A miracle, by definition, is an exception and a suspension of the natural order. If we cannot believe in a God who works through *and* above the natural order, our God is entirely too small, amen?

But let's not miss the bigger miracle here: God chose to save a man who deserved to die. Blatant disobedience deserves punishment. The point of the whale is that God chose to save Jonah when Jonah didn't deserve to be saved. Now we're talking the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ, which is exactly this very same point: God sent Jesus to go into the depths of human sinfulness and rescue those who didn't deserve to be rescued...including me...and including you!

It is no small thing that Jesus referred to the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12:38-41

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

If you believe in Jesus, we must take very seriously that Jesus pointed to Jonah in the belly of the great fish as a sign. A sign points beyond itself. Jonah in the belly of that fish points to the greater mystery of God's unmerited grace and forgiveness. Jonah in the belly of the fish points to Jesus, who willingly enters into the depths of human sin, suffering the death that unfaithful sinners deserve, but then He rises again and calls all people to repent, that they might receive God's unmerited mercy.

Church, there is so much more here than a whale. The great fish is hardly mentioned, with no descriptions, no embellishments...it's simply reported as something that happened. As a scholar of scripture and an intellectual, I think it is true that Jonah was miraculously saved by God. I believe he spent three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish because Jesus refers to Jonah's time there as a sign of what the Son of Man is going to do to save our souls. I have no problem understanding that the point of this sign...the point of this story...and the point of the Gospel...is to prompt us to repent...to believe...so that we will be radically grateful for God's unmerited grace for us, and so that we will gladly go wherever the LORD calls us to go to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, amen?

Church...I can't wait to walk through this timeless story with you. As we get ready to close, I want to encourage you to read through the book of Jonah every week of this series. But don't get in a hurry. Spend some time looking at each verse, and ask yourself, "What does this say about God? What does this say about me? What does this say about those who are far from God?" I'm telling you...there is much more here than you think.

We'll begin our journey in earnest next Sunday. For now, I hope you will be attentive to the word of the Lord, and may we all arise and go wherever the Lord calls us.

Let us pray.