

Jonah: *The Backstory of Middle Earth*
Jonah 1:1-3a

Have you ever noticed that the really great stories that make the best movies are stories that assume a whole lot of history that preceded the actual story you are reading?

For example, when you first sit down to read *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, you are immediately introduced to these odd little people who live in the Shire called Hobbits (show pic of Hobbit with Jim's face if possible!). Then you meet dwarfs, and an old wizard named Gandalf, and not long after you meet elves. The story is colorful and adventurous, and you're pretty sure that the point of the story is that Bilbo the hobbit is going to help the dwarfs get their gold back from a nasty old dragon named Smaug. But then, along the way, the main character, Bilbo Baggins, "accidentally" falls into a dark cave where he "accidentally" finds a gold ring lying on the ground. The gold ring makes him invisible whenever he puts it on, and the ability to disappear from sight helps him escape the owner of the ring, some creepy guy called "Gollum." The ring comes in handy later on as well, but we never know why the ring makes Bilbo invisible, or how that ring came about in the first place. The story ends with a big battle, the good guys win, and Bilbo goes back to the Shire with his special ring and some great stories to tell his friends, and everyone lives happily ever after, right?

Well...later, in *The Lord of the Rings* series, we understand that the gold ring found by Bilbo has a very long history that will basically determine the fate of the world. It's not until we understand that history, and all that happens much later in the great battle for Middle Earth, that we can then go back and read *The Hobbit* all over again with a completely different set of lenses.

You see, J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Christian, and he understood that the best stories don't come about out of thin air. The intentions, actions, outcomes, and significance of any person's story always happen within the context of previous history...a history shaped by powers far greater than the accumulated adventures of men.

Such is the case with Jonah. Jonah is a colorful, exciting, dramatic short story that has value in and of itself. However, the more we know of the deep history leading up to Jonah, the more we will come to grasp the profound significance of this little story tucked away in the much-neglected section of our Bibles commonly referred to as "the minor prophets".

So, with no further ado, let us read a bit from Jonah, and then we'll dive into a small sampling of the backstory of Middle Earth! Our text is Jonah 1:1-2: Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) The Context of Covenant; 2) The Abrahamic Covenant; 3) The Mosaic Covenant; and 4) Prophetic Precedent.

I. The Context of Covenant

It is difficult to appreciate and understand the book of Jonah if we have not first come to understand the covenants that God established with His people, Israel.

But first: what's a covenant? A covenant is, in its simplest terms, a relational agreement between two parties. Now...there are many ways that two parties can agree. The least formal method is an agreement by verbal consent. For example, we can agree that we should get together and have lunch sometime soon. Both of us are hoping that might work out, but if it doesn't, it won't be a big deal because even though we informally agreed, we did not formally commit to a time or date. Verbal agreement is loosey-goosey, open to interpretation, and lacking any clear expectation or consequence.

The most formal means of making an agreement between two parties is a legal contract. If I employ your services as a lawyer, I will be bound by contract to pay you an ungodly amount of money per hour! If I commit to sell you my house, we must enter into a written contract in which I agree to hand over my keys when you make payment on the house, which will require you to sign a legal contract with the bank to secure a loan, and so on. In legal contracts, there are clear expectations and clear penalties if either party fails to live up to the contract.

So...how does "a covenant" compare to verbal consent vs. a legal contract? I once heard Tim Keller state that a covenant is a binding agreement more relational than a real-estate contract but more legal than a handshake.

For example: If we establish a *covenant* to be in a mentoring relationship, I am agreeing to spend time teaching and coaching you with the agreement that you will show up each week with a teachable attitude and you are willing to put into practice what we agree upon during our sessions. Our covenant includes a commitment of regular time on a specific day of the week at a specific hour. Our covenant is relational in nature, but there are clear expectations and even clear consequences that will follow a breach of the covenant.

A covenant is a form of contract, but it's a relational contract. Marriage serves as the premier example of a covenant that most of us can identify with.

So, with this idea of covenant in mind, it is vital for us to acknowledge that God is covenantal in the way that He interacts with Israel. God establishes covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David...and God's final covenant is established through Jesus. Now, I can't possibly take you through a full study of God's covenants, but it's critically important that we revisit the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant because both are necessary if we are to understand Jonah's call to go to Nineveh.

II. The Abrahamic Covenant

In Genesis 12:1-3 we read: Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

In the Abrahamic covenant, God promises to make a great nation from Abram's seed. God promises to make Abram's name great; and God will make Abram to be a blessing. God will bless those who bless Abram, and God will curse those who oppose Abram; and God will bless all the families of the earth through Abram. That's God's side of the covenant. All Abram has to do is leave his country, his kinsmen, and his father's house and travel to an unknown land...the place that God will eventually show him once he is underway. In other words, Abram's side of the covenant is that he will have faith in God and trust God enough to start walking even though he has no idea where he is going!

So...what happens after God extends this covenant to Abram? We read in Genesis 12:4, "So Abram went..." Abram trusted God enough to start walking. Now...we know that Abram, who is later known as Abraham, was not a perfectly faithful guy, and there are all kinds of failures and debacles that are well-documented in Abraham's life. However, because Abraham went...God remained faithful to His promises.

There's a lot to note in the Abrahamic covenant, but I want you to pay particular attention to God's promise that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. Please note God's ultimate intent: God will set apart a people through whom He will bless all nations. Abraham's seed will eventually bless all the families of the earth.

Why is this covenant history critical to understanding Jonah's call to Nineveh? Well, it's critical because even though God chose Abraham's seed (Israel) to be His people, God has always been concerned for all the nations. God is sovereign over all nations, even if they fail to acknowledge that fact. We must also note that those who are chosen by God and are blessed by His covenants are always those expected to be "a light unto the nations." That rule still applies today, Church. Don't miss that.

Sadly, by the time we get to Jonah, Israel has long forgotten her call to be a blessing to the nations. As we read one story after another about how "they did evil in the sight of God" we discover an Israel who had reduced Yahweh to a local deity whose power and jurisdiction was limited to their borders and their interests. Israel is in survival mode, and they have nothing but enmity and loathing for the nations.

Some of you questioned my use of the words "toxic nationalism" last Sunday. I would describe toxic nationalism as the conviction that God is most interested in our country, our interests, and the flourishing of our nation above all others. It's reducing God to a local deity or, even worse, allowing our patriotism to become an idol over our worship of the one, true God who is sovereign over all the nations. Jonah's story is going to both reveal and critique this kind of nationalism, but I want you to see that God revealed long ago, over a thousand years before Jonah, that He is the God of all nations. He has always intended to bless all nations through His people. Keep that in mind as we look briefly now at...

III. The Mosaic Covenant

Several hundred years after God established His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, we come to the book of Exodus. God's people have grown in number, but they are in dire straits. The Hebrew people have been subjected to slavery in the country of Egypt, and their cries have been heard by a faithful God. So, as you know, God raises up Moses to serve as their deliverer, and after a series of dramatic events, God delivers His people from slavery in Egypt. He delivers them from Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea; and eventually He leads them to the Jordan where they are about to enter the land God promised Abraham many years earlier. And that brings us to the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 11, prior to entering the land, God establishes His covenant with Israel through Moses.

Now, to be clear, the Mosaic Covenant is a work in progress over a lengthy period. God dictates the Ten Commandments fairly early after the exodus from Egypt, and He provides other laws that are all part of the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19-24. However, it is on the banks of the Jordan River where God declares the conditions of His new covenant with Israel. God makes it clear that, as they take possession of the land, His covenant with Israel will be accompanied with blessings and curses. We read in Deuteronomy 11:26-28:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

The covenant that God makes with Moses is of a different nature than the covenant He made with Abraham. Both covenants are valid, but they are different. Whereas the Abrahamic covenant consists mostly of God's unilateral promises and God asks only that Abraham 'go', the Mosaic Covenant requires much more from the Israelites. It is a covenant based upon God's law. If the Israelites keep the law, they keep God's blessings. If they disobey the law, there will be very significant consequences that follow...they will experience God's curse. If you want to read further on the blessings and curses, take some time this week and read the book of Deuteronomy and particularly the 28th chapter.

Now, it's important to remember that the Mosaic Covenant is based upon God's unilateral action of salvation by grace. God reminds the Israelites again and again that He was the One who delivered them out of slavery. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob intervened. It was God's mercy that led to their deliverance. But as a consequence of God's unmerited grace and salvation, God's expectation is that the Israelites will love and obey Him and bow to no other. God and God alone is worthy of their love, their worship, and their obedience. God is not being unreasonable. His covenant is based upon His steadfast love and faithfulness, but the covenant requires both parties to be faithful. Faithfulness for Israel means loving God wholeheartedly; and to love God wholeheartedly is to obey His commandments and to worship no other gods.

Now, if you've read the Old Testament, you know that Israel does a pretty horrible job of honoring the Mosaic covenant, *as would we all!* The sinful nature of humanity is on full display, so we read countless stories of Israel suffering the consequences for breaking covenant with God. What I want you to note is that, in many instances, when the Israelites break covenant with God,

the consequences...the curse that follows...comes at the hand of other nations. For example, after crossing the Jordan the Israelites experience one military success after another until they break faith with God's commands in Joshua 7. A man named Achan takes some of the objects devoted to the Canaanite gods and hides them in his tent...which was strictly forbidden by God. So, when Joshua sends a platoon to take the small pocket of resistance in the city of Ai, God hands them over to the enemy...they are soundly defeated by the forces of Ai and many people are killed.

This is a common story in the OT. Israel's punishment for covenant unfaithfulness often comes in the form of a military defeat at the hand of the Gentile nations. Clearly these painful losses are not only God's justice, they are also intended to bring Israel to repentance so that they will turn back to the Lord and honor their covenant. If, after suffering the consequences of their sin, Israel repents and places their hope in God, the LORD removes the curse, shows them mercy, and His blessing returns. If you read Joshua and Judges, you'll see this cycle happen again and again. Israel breaks covenant and sins against God; God punishes Israel through the conquest of other nations; Israel repents and cries out to God for deliverance; God relents and rescues His people, often by means of a judge or a prophet; the Israelites rejoice and are grateful for a time but then fall into sin and begin to worship other gods, and then the whole cycle starts over again.

Now...the Mosaic Covenant, along with the cycle of blessings and curses, is so important for us to remember because it demonstrates God's commitment to justice and mercy. Over and over again we see God's justice administered to Israel when they break God's law and worship other gods, but over and over again we see God's mercy extended to Israel when they repent. God's justice and mercy towards Israel, as well as God's justice and mercy toward the nations, is a huge theme as we follow Jonah on his journey. But there is one more thing here that I want you to see in Deuteronomy.

If you are a *Lord of the Rings* fan, you will remember that there was an ancient poem that many of the lead characters had memorized. It was a prophetic poem regarding the Shards of Narsil:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

Hope remained for the people of Middle Earth because they held on to this prophetic poem in their hearts for hundreds of years. Well, again, Tolkien pulled the use of prophetic poem straight from the scriptures. So let me show you a real prophetic poem that speaks volumes into the narrative of Jonah, and we'll come back to this poem in the weeks to come.

At the very end of Deuteronomy, in the 32nd chapter, we find a long poetic section called *The Song of Moses*. In the poem, God speaks prophetically through Moses, remembering how He made the people of Jacob (Israel) his "allotted heritage" and how he saved and provided for His

people. Then the poem turns dark as God recalls and predicts how Israel “scoffed at the Rock of his salvation” and “stirred God to jealousy with strange gods...they sacrificed to demons that were no gods; to gods they had never known...” Then we come to the passage I want you to remember in vs. 21:

They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

God prophecies that a day will come when He will make Israel jealous through those “who are no people...He will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.” This prophetic poem speaks volumes into God’s intention for calling Jonah to prophecy to Nineveh. God is fulfilling this prophecy, and we’ll unpack that further as we go on.

Finally, in vs. 36 of the prophetic poem, God says, “For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.”

This is precisely the language used in 2 Kings 14:26 that was associated with Jonah’s service as a prophet: “For the LORD saw the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.”

Church, I hope you can see that this little story of Jonah is part of a far deeper story. What God predicted through Moses on the banks of the Jordan River a thousand years earlier is now becoming more clear through the most unlikely prophet...a man named Jonah. And Jonah’s story points forward to a mystery that the Apostle Paul refers to in Ephesians 3: “...the mystery that was made known to me through revelation...the mystery of Christ which has now been made known to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit...this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” We spent a lot of time on that mystery recently in our journey through Ephesians, but I hope you can see that this story of Jonah begins to point to that mystery in an unprecedented way, and it’s so important that it’s one of three prophetic stories that Jesus points to in the New Testament. Let me quickly show you the other two prophetic stories that Jesus points to regarding this mystery because they are stories that immediately preceded Jonah.

IV. Prophetic Precedents

It’s important to remember that Jonah is not a prophet in isolation. Jonah is one of many prophets called upon by God to declare His word, and the story of Jonah falls perfectly into place with two other prophets that preceded Jonah: Elijah and Elisha. If you go back and read about these two famous prophets in I Kings and II Kings, they both have a unique story that stretches beyond the boundaries of Israel...and both stories are very important.

First, we have the story of Elijah who saves the widow of Zarephath and her son from starvation. I don’t have time to get too deep into this story, but it’s critically important to note that Zarephath was in the region of Sidon...a region consisting of Gentiles. Not only does Elijah stay in Zarephath and assist the widow, but he later returns and essentially resurrects her son

from the dead. The closing of that story is so important when the Gentile woman looks at Elijah and states in 1 Kings 17:24, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is true.” Keep that story in mind as we look now to Elisha.

Elisha was the apprentice of Elijah who received the power of Elijah shortly after Elijah was swept up to heaven in chariots of fire. We read about Elisha’s prophetic work in the early chapters of 2 Kings, but I want to draw your attention to a specific story in 2 Kings 5 featuring a man named Naaman. According to 2 Kings 5:1, “Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria.” That sentence alone is a lot to chew on! The LORD gave the Syrians victory OVER ISRAEL through this great commander named Naaman...who, it turns out, was a leper. As we read on, we learn that while they were defeating Israel in battle, the Syrians kidnapped a little girl from Israel who now works with Naaman’s wife in Syria. While the little Jewish girl and the commander’s wife are busy doing chores, the girl happens to mention that there is a powerful prophet in her homeland who could cure Naaman of his leprosy. As most of you know, Elisha is that prophet, and he does finally cure Naaman of his leprosy. Naaman then proclaims in vs. 15ff: “Behold, I know that there is no god in all the earth but in Israel...and from now on your servant will not offer burnt offerings or sacrifice to any god but the LORD.”

Note the pattern: a mighty prophet of Israel, sent by the word of the Lord, brings healing outside the borders of Israel. The immediate response is faith in the one true God by those thought to be outside of God’s election.

Now...why are these two stories so important and precursors to Jonah? Well, let’s look to Luke 4. You might remember when Jesus attended the synagogue worship on the Sabbath in his hometown of Nazareth. And you might remember how that story ends...with the crowd getting so angry that they attempt to throw Jesus down a cliff. Do you remember what made the Jews in Nazareth so angry? Was it the fact that Jesus associated Himself as the Messiah? No. I’ll show you...here’s what Jesus says in Luke 4:24-27 that nearly gets Him killed:

²⁴ And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

Jesus reminds the unbelieving Jews that God chose to send His mighty prophets to the outsiders...to the Gentiles...because Israel was stubborn in her idolatry and sin against God.

And what was the effect? The Jews became jealous...and angry. So angry they attempted to kill Jesus on the spot.

Do you see how these stories are fulfilling the prophetic poem of Moses? Three prophetic references made by Jesus all point to the same thing. Jesus referred to the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12:38-41 and states that the Ninevites will rise up and condemn unrepentant Israel

because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now we've seen Jesus hail back to the Gentile mission of Elijah and Elisha. Church...this is what God was doing in the 8th century BC, this is the context of our story in Jonah, and this is still what God is doing to this very day. God is working through His people to redeem the whole world to Himself through His only Son, and those who know the truth and have been saved by His grace are to be a light unto the nations. That call is not optional...it is inevitable.

I hope this history has been helpful. Bookmark this sermon because it may serve as a resource for you as we work our way through Jonah. This backstory is so, so, so important for us to hear in 21st century America, particularly in an election year. God is sovereign over all the nations, over all political parties, over all the people of the world. God cares for all the nations, and He is actively pursuing all people with His grace...including you, including me, including all of them. Let us not fall into the same sin as the ancient Israelites who assumed that God preferred their nation, or their party, or their tribe over all the others. Instead, let us commit ourselves, as those saved by God's unmerited grace, to serve as a light unto the nations...trusting in God's sovereign hand, sharing the good news and calling sinners to repent and to turn back to God. Our mission begins with our hometown and the street where we live and stretches to the very ends of the earth. This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let us pray