

The Prophet Jonah

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[0 : 0 0] This is our final story from the Old Testament in our Great Story series. In our Great Story series, we've been looking at the children's storybook stories from the Bible, the stories that usually make it into the storybooks, and having an adult's look, if you will, at the theology.

And this is the last one from the Old Testament, Jonah definitely deserves to be a part of the series, as we all know. But when you do an adult's look at the stories you know from your childhood, if you grew up in the church reading the Bible, there's always things to see a little bit differently than you thought about when you were a kid.

And there's two things here immediately. And one, that there is no whale. That's a misconception. There might be a whale. We have no idea. It's a great sea creature. That's all we're told.

Jonah and the whale, it's Jonah and the sea creature, whatever that might have been. Only Jonah and God know the answer to that. We don't. So the second and more important thing is that Jonah is no hero.

Jonah isn't a good guy in this story. Every story, almost every story, has a protagonist and an antagonist.

[1 : 1 3] And chapter four is the chapter that frames the meaning for the rest of the book. And what we learn about in chapter four is that the purpose, what the reader needs to see is that the antagonist in this book is Jonah.

And that the protagonist, who the story is really about, is God. God is the protagonist in the story. The story is here to teach us something about God, not Jonah.

Jonah is a mess the whole time throughout this book. Jonah is a mess. He is a mess of a prophet. And for that reason, a lot of commentators don't know whether to call this book a comedy or a tragedy.

Not a comedy exactly in the modern sense. Like if it was made into a movie, it might star Will Ferrell or something like that. But a comedy in the ancient sense in that it has a good ending. Nineveh is saved, but it's saved despite the central character, Jonah.

And the last chapter ends in a question in order to convey a tragedy, a question that's left open to Jonah. So we don't really know whether to say, this is comedy, this is tragedy.

[2 : 1 8] And so this morning, we're going to try to look at the whole story. We read the whole story. I'm going to try to preach on the whole story on the main ideas, what I think are the main ideas, which is a bold move. Because there are tons of subplots. There are tons of little things.

We could preach multiple sermons on each chapter and people have done that. But our mission this morning is not to go to Nineveh, but to preach the whole book of Jonah. So we're going to go for it. Three things. Jonah teaches us about the kingdom of mercy, about the God of mercy, and about the cost of mercy.

So first, Jonah's problem in this passage teaches us about the kingdom of mercy. Verse one, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and says, go, arise, go up to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.

His mission was to get up and go to Nineveh. Jonah is the subject of that mission. It's Jonah's mission to go to Nineveh. And Jonah is a northern prophet. There's some verses about him in the book of 2 Kings.

So we know a little bit about his story. He is ministering in the northern kingdom after the kingdom. The southern and northern kingdom of Israel had been divided. And this is close to 800 BC, sometime between 750 and 800 BC.

[3 : 38] And he sent to Nineveh, which is a big, important ancient city. This is the capital of the Assyrian Empire. In Genesis 10, it's mentioned, it's very ancient. It's mentioned as one of the early cities in the table of nations.

And if you were to go back to 750 BC and read the local newspaper, the Samarian Times, or the Israelite Herald, or whatever they might have had, you would have known, you would have read on the front page, current affairs, Assyria is the biggest empire in the world.

It's the strongest and most powerful. It's the enemy of Israel, and it's on conquest to destroy Israel. That was what was happening in the 8th century BC.

And this book, at the earliest possible date, was written to the next generation of Israelites. Post-Jona's lifetime, which is the late 700s.

And this is the generation that had seen what Assyria, Nineveh, would do after Jonah's lifetime. And that's in 722 BC, Nineveh came down and crushed Samaria and captured the people of Israel.

[4 : 54] And that means when the original readers of this book open it up and see God say to Jonah, go to Nineveh because you're the only hope of their salvation, otherwise they're going to be destroyed, the original readers are saying, no, don't do it, Jonah, don't go, not to those people, not to the Assyrians.

Do you know what they've done to us? Do you know who they are? Not those people. They're outside. They're not part of the people of God. There are enemies. They hated the Assyrians. It's the worst culture in the ancient East in the eyes of the Israelite.

The original reader is screaming at the text, don't do it, Jonah. And Jonah doesn't do it. He runs away. And that means that Jonah in this book is standing in, representing the attitude of Israel to the Gentiles, to the Assyrians, to the people that aren't them, to another culture in a faraway land.

So he becomes a runaway prophet, a prophet in rebellion. And to really get the picture of exactly how big this, how big, how much of a runaway prophet he was, it would be good. I should have, maybe you should have done this, put up a map so you could see.

He decides to go down to Joppa to get on a ship that's going to Tarshish. Now where is Tarshish? Tarshish is like Neverland in the Old Testament, because nobody ever gets there. If you want to go to Neverland, you're never going to get there.

[6 : 24] Tarshish for the Israelite is the farthest shore. Isaiah 60 verse 9 literally calls Tarshish the farthest shore. It's as far west as you can go. We don't know exactly where it was, but scholars think it might have been what we call today the south of Spain.

It was a long way away. Nineveh is northeast, hundreds of miles. Tarshish is the farthest shore west, beyond what any Israelite has ever known.

And so you see, he literally runs in the exact opposite direction as far as he could possibly get away from having to minister to those dirty pagans, because he hates them. And the question then is why exactly does he do it? Why does he run? Why does he hate him so much?

Why is he so against going and ministering to Nineveh? And the answer is found in chapter 4. Chapter 4 frames the meaning of the rest of the book, and he tells us exactly why in chapter 4 verse 2.

He went straight to the Lord and said, Oh, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country. This is why I ran to Tarshish, for I knew, and this is where the comedy begins, I knew that you're a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abounding instead fast love and relenting from disaster.

[7 : 47] So after he goes to Nineveh and the Ninevites repent and God relents from destroying them, Jonah's response is, this is exactly why I didn't want to go to Tarshish. I didn't want to go to Nineveh and I fled to Tarshish, because I knew you're merciful and you're loving and you're kind and you're compassionate and you're gracious.

I knew that you were like this, and this is why I didn't want to come. I don't want to serve a God that's gracious and loving and compassionate that will actually forgive people when they ask for it. You see, it's meant to be comedic. It's ridiculous.

He's putting God in the dock, as C.S. Lewis says, because of God's compassion, because of God's forgiveness, and why is he saying it? Well, I think there's two reasons. And the first, he says it, I would rather die than live, is his very next comment.

I would rather die than live. In other words, I would rather die than see these people forgiven to become part of the people of God.

I would rather die. In other words, Jonah has a deep hatred for a specific ethne, an ethnic group.

[8 : 58] Today, we call that racism. He has a deep hatred for a specific people group. And he is not like the prophet that he is the shadow of in the New Testament, who told the parable of the Good Samaritan to break down the barriers between Jew and Gentile based on nothing but the condition of race, of ethnicity, of being part of a specific people.

But he was not willing to bless those who curse him, like a later prophet would be.

And that means one of the basic points of this book is that if you believe in the God of the Bible and you want to be like him, there is no place in the kingdom of God for racism, for exclusion of a particular type of people based on some phenotype, some skin color, or peculiarity of who they are and the culture they come from.

And what we're being told here is that God is not like that, but Jonah was, because God loves the totality of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

But the second reason that Jonah doesn't want to go, I think, is because he misses the basic concept of God's nature and how God's nature plays out in redemption, in salvation throughout the Bible.

[10 : 35] In other words, he says to God, I didn't want to come because I knew you would forgive these people. I knew you would show them love. I knew you would have compassion on them. And what he's saying there is, where's the justice, man?

Where's the justice? Do you know who these people are? There are legends that outside the city of Nineveh from extra biblical sources that we have, that they would take people's bodies that they had murdered the Ninevites and they would stake them up and line the streets that enter into the city as a warning that anybody who dares come to this city that's not one of us, this is what's going to happen to you.

That's what the Ninevites were like. And he's saying, where's the justice? In other words, Jonah is saying, your standards are too low. You forgive willy-nilly.

You'll give it to anybody that asks for it. In other words, Jonah was saying that I have a higher standard of justice, oh God, than you do. I don't see how it makes sense that if somebody asks for forgiveness, you actually give it to them, simply on the grounds that they ask for forgiveness.

Forgiveness, in other words, he's saying, it can't be that easy. It can't be so simple. They don't deserve it. And so the irony is that Jonah doesn't actually understand the religion he comes from.

[11 : 57] He forgot Deuteronomy 8-10 when God said, you, oh, Israelite, have been chosen and forgiven, not because of anything, and you don't think when you go into the land of Canaan that you're better than anyone of the Canaanites.

He forgot the religion that he can't, he forgot the nature of the biblical God. The irony is that Jonah actually looks more pagan than they do.

He thinks that his religion is one based on two things. Not being from a specific nation and something that you earn through merit, which is the very definition of all the religions that Israelite came to Canaan to counter.

And that's the irony. He's a missionary to the pagans, but he actually looks like a pagan. And so the explanation for the whole first half of the book is found right there at the end in chapter 4.

I would rather die than see them live. Now, you've got this, I just want to show you this because the writer here frames the narrative with very specific language that might not be easy to see at first glance, but that's critically important to understanding the overall point.

[13 : 09] And it reveals Jonah's logic. You see in chapter 1, God says to Jonah in verse 2, arise, go up to Nineveh. It literally says, go up to Nineveh, that great city.

And then in chapter 2, verse 6, when Jonah is being saved from the well, here's how he describes salvation in the second half of that verse. You brought up my life from the pit, from the land of death.

And so what that means is the writer is framing uscent and decent language. The whole story is an uscent going up language and going down language.

Okay? His command is go up to Nineveh and save those people. Or when God saves him, he brings him up. So going up is life and going down, that means going down is death. Now, see how Jonah responds.

Verse 3, look at how he frames it. Instead of going up, he went down to Joppa. Verse 5, instead of going up to the top of the ship during the storm, he goes down, he goes down into the ship.

[14 : 11] Then in verse 15, they throw him down into the depths of the sea. Chapter 2, verse 1, he sinks down into the sea until chapter 6, the final, and the climax. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever, which is the land of shield or land of death.

You see, so the whole way the story is framed is that Jonah's mission is to go up and give life. And instead he chooses to go down, down, down, down, down six times into the place of shield, into the place of death.

In other words, what he says in chapter 4 comes true of him in chapter 1. I would rather die than see them live. And so you see his logic.

If I've been called to be the one who brings salvation to Nineveh, then I will go down in order that they might die with me.

This was his prophecy. This was his mission as a prophet in his mind. I'll die so that they die. I'll go all the way down to the depths of shield just so that they don't get life.

[15 : 15] So when he's told to go up and give life, he goes down and chooses death so that he doesn't have to give life to people that he hates. In other words, he's confused about the kingdom of God.

He thinks the kingdom of God is a place and a specific people who have done specific things to earn their place.

On August 24th, the year 410 AD, one of the most important events that's ever happened in all of human history, and that's that King Alaric and the Goths sacked the city of Rome for three days.

And it wasn't even that the Goths went into Rome and wanted to take Rome. They went in and sacked it and then left. And it was a proclamation to the world that Rome wasn't what everybody thought Rome was.

A couple of things happened after that. There were some lessons to the Roman Empire. The first was that if Rome, the eternal city can fall, then anybody can fall.

[16 : 34] And secondly, the Christians had a very specific response. About a hundred years earlier, the Christians had gained a lot of power in the Roman Empire after the Emperor Constantine.

And at this time, the Christians were encouraged because they thought that they had basically foreseen God's great mission through Rome. That because Christians had been given political power in Rome, that now God was going to change the whole world through the Roman Empire.

That the Roman Empire essentially was going to become linked hand in hand with as the kingdom of God itself on Earth. And so when Rome fell, what they called the eternal city, they thought of it as the city of God on Earth.

They said, God has abandoned us. What are we to do? The kingdom of God is lost. And enter one of the great early theologians, one of the great church fathers, Augustine, the bishop in Northern Africa, who wrote a book in response to the way the Christians were acting about losing the eternal city.

Supposing that the kingdom of God was in this city, that this was the kingdom of God on Earth, that God had put all the power of the church right here in the city of Rome. And he wrote his biggest book, probably his hardest book to read.

[17 : 53] It's like this thick, literally, if you buy a copy. But one of the best books, one of the greatest books that's ever been written in all of history. And this is Augustine's basic point to the people of Rome at that time.

And it's the very thing that Jonah needed to learn, that no city, no nation, no people group is to be equated in this earthly temporal life with the kingdom of God.

Every single empire ends, no single nation, no single people, no single race has grounds to call themselves the eternal city.

And so he said, all of that, Rome and every other empire, every other nation, every other people group, this is all part of the city of man, as he called it. But we are citizens of the city of God.

And the city of God transcends every nation. It is truly universal. It is in every nation, among every people, across all times.

[18 : 59] And so he told them, whether you are in or out of the kingdom doesn't depend on what country you're a citizen of, what your skin color looks like, what you've done in the past, what traditions you hold on to, whether or not you grew up in the local church, in the free church.

None of it depends on that. And this is what Jonah couldn't see. Jesus tried to teach it to the Pharisees in Matthew 12 by illustrating it with Jonah.

And Matthew 12 describes in Pharisees, come to Jesus and they say, show us a sign, show us proof that you are truly the Son of God, that you're truly the Messiah. And one of his responses to them is this, when Jonah went to Nineveh, the Ninevites repented, and Nineveh, at the end of time, will stand up and condemn you.

In other words, it is not the horror of your sin, no matter what you've done, that can keep you out of the kingdom of God.

I can tell you with confidence that Ninevites were worse than you. And it's not on the flip side, your good works, your public reputation, your attendance in a church, the tradition you were brought up in, that will keep you in.

[20 : 34] What Jonah and Jesus is saying in Matthew 12 is that it is nothing but the mercy of God given as a gift to people who realize they don't deserve mercy.

That's the ticket to being a citizen of the kingdom of God. And it's one that Jonah had to learn. Kevin DeYoung put it this way, there's a paraphrase earlier this week actually.

He said this, we must always make it clear that the church is not for Scottish people. It's not for American people. It's not for people of one race or of a particular political persuasion or for middle class people.

It's a church for Jesus people. And we have to do everything we can to make sure that everybody knows that this is what the church is about. And that the banner over the church is the cross of Jesus Christ, high and lifted up.

The only hope, he says, for all is the true eternal city that transcends every culture and people and includes every culture and people. So that's point one, point two.

[21 : 42] And each point is significantly shorter than that point. Jonah's rebuke also teaches us about this God of mercy. So very briefly, Jonah gets rebuke twice in this passage.

The first is by pagan sailors and the second time is by God. And we're just going to focus on God's rebuke because God is more important than sailors and we don't have time to look at the sailors.

God's rebuke, Hamish read it for us. It's incredibly puzzling. This is the question he ends with. Should I not pity Nineveh, literally should I not have compassion on Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

What? It's puzzling. It's actually very simple. Jonah goes out from the city of Nineveh and he says, I'm willing to die. But he goes out to see what might happen to Nineveh.

Jonah had said, 40 days you have to repent. So Jonah goes out hoping that God might still destroy them. That's why he goes out to look at the city. And when he's out there, he builds a tent.

[22 : 57] And over that tent, God sends a plant. This is literally, it says in your footnote there, a castor oil plant. Castor oil plants, we still use them.

Castor oil plants were incredibly important in the ancient world. We use the seeds or fire starters, natural fire starters, but also it was a medicinal plant used for a lot of medicine in the ancient Near East.

Farms of it everywhere in the ancient world. He sends a plant. And the key is in, I think at the end of verse six, Jonah fell in love with this plant.

It says, Jonah was exceedingly glad that the plant had come. Jonah loves the plant. And then God sends a worm and a scorching east wind and the plant dies.

And Jonah has lost his love, the plant. He's incredibly angry because it was what sheltered him in the middle of the desert.

[23 : 59] And he loved it. He's so angry. I mean, we can see that he truly did care for it and it's dead now. And so God asked him, are you right to be angry that this plant is dead, that I've taken away this plant?

And Jonah says, yeah, I'm right. I'm angry enough to die. I'm angry. I'm so mad that I'm willing to die over this. I'm so mad that you've taken away this plant. He loved the plant. And then God says two points in response.

Here's God's two points. First, verse 10, you loved this plant. You had compassion on this plant, but you didn't make it.

You didn't sow the ground. You didn't till. You didn't sow the seed. You didn't watch it grow from birth. You're not the maker of this plant, but still you loved it.

And you feel like you had a right to do so. That's the first point. Secondly, the point, second point he's making. You, Jonah, loved a plant. It's a plant.

[24 : 59] Hence the question, should I not show compassion on a city of 120,000 persons? In other words, people, Jonah, it's people.

Do you not understand the unity of humanity, the image of God? I love these people. You love the plant. I love these people. Not only that, but I love their cattle. What does that mean?

Some people want to make this into an ecological theology of sorts, which is maybe the case, but cattle. What's cattle in the ancient Near East? Cattle in the ancient Near East are cash money.

Cattle is the economic, is a word for the economy of the city. It's society. I created human beings and the societies.

I commissioned them to till the ground in the Garden of Eden, and that's what the Assyrians and the Ninevites have done. And I love them, even though they don't know their right hand from their left. They've gone the wrong way.

[25 : 56] In other words, they are redeemable, and so is their culture. And the way you feel about that plant is so much less than the fact that I created these people, and I love them.

I raised them up from the ground. In other words, he's asking, are you, prophet of God, members of the church, not willing to show mercy to people, even if they don't deserve it?

And the irony, the comedy, did you catch it? The comedy of the story. To get it, you have to go back to the middle, to the great sea creature.

What happened to Jonah? He chose in the face of his mission from God to go down, down, down, down, down, all the way to Sheol, all to the place of death. And when he was there, he repented.

And he asked for forgiveness, and God brought him back up. And now, the God of compassion who had given Jonah life from the dead.

[27 : 04] The only reason Jonah is standing there is because he cared for Jonah enough to that when Jonah asked for repentance, he actually gave it to him. He actually gave him forgiveness. Now, Jonah is unwilling to show the mercy to somebody else that he had received.

You see? In other words, he's saying, Jonah, you who has received mercy are you merciless. And so, what the point is, is that the text is pushing us today against any sense of a church versus world mentality.

And Martin Luther knew this in the 1520s during the time of the Reformation when he described who we are, if you're a believer today, as justified sinners. Justified sinners, he was so bold to say.

In other words, we are recipients of mercy, as was Jonah. And so, the point of the book is this. How does the church relate to the world? Do you see yourself as a sinner who has received mercy for those people who have yet to receive mercy?

Or are you merciless, one who has received mercy against those who haven't? Against them or for them? That's the question he's asking.

[28 : 28] And that's why the question is open at the end of the book, right? There's no answer. Jonah doesn't respond. There's no response. Why would you leave it hanging like this?

Why would you leave it the last word being cattle? In a book like this, why? You know why? Because he's asking you, the reader, the question. Do you know yourself as a person who has received great mercy?

Do you get it, Jonah, that you are just like the Ninevites? You're no different. Everybody's the Ninevites, all deserving of death. And if you have life, it's only because it's been given through the mercy of God.

Are you able, on your daily mission, Monday to Friday, to be a merciful person? Do you see yourself? Do you know yourself that way?

Okay, so finally, and very briefly, the ultimate point of the passage is this. Jonah teaches us that God is merciful. We just learned that.

[29 : 28] And that his mercy comes at great cost. We'll just be a few minutes, just two or three minutes on this. The overarching irony, the overarching comedy, that's also a tragedy of the book, is that Jonah is a reluctant prophet.

He's a mess. He's at odds with God all the way to the very last word. And Jonah, at the very same time, doesn't know that he is the drama of redemption.

He is the sign. He is the symbol. He is the type. He is the teaching point. This starts in chapter 4, verse 1 and 2, when he looks up to God and he says, Where's the justice, man?

How can you forgive like this? How can you simply forgive people who just ask for it? It doesn't seem just to me. It doesn't seem right. I have a higher standard than you do.

Oh, Jonah, you had no idea. Jonah had no idea that his story is the drama of redemption, typified, signaled to answer the question, Where is the justice of God?

[30 : 50] Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 12, when the Pharisees and scribes come to him and they say, Give us a sign. Show us that you are truly what you say you are. And Jesus says, You want a sign from me?

You will not get a sign until you see the sign of Jonah. What's the sign of Jonah? Here it is.

Jonah didn't want those dirty pagans to live. But when the sailors were about to die, it was only in Jonah going down to the depths of Sheol.

And rising up again from that grave for three after three days that gave the gift of life to those dirty pagans. He had no idea what he was doing.

He had no idea that his death and his resurrection were the mediation of redemption to pagans at the beginning of the book and at the end of the book.

[31 : 53] He runs away so dirty pagans can't get saved and he ends up dying for dirty pagans so they might be saved and he can't see it.

There's the sign of Jonah, the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of human beings. That type of redemption was totally unexpected.

That a prophet would go down to the depths of Sheol to the darkness and be swallowed by it and after three days rising again from the dead, Gentiles might have hope.

That's the sign of Jonah. Where's the justice? Jonah asked God. God says this, You are the sign pointing to precisely where my mercy and justice will meet.

A better Jonah going to the cross, being swallowed by death and being risen again from the dead after three days. He is Jesus Christ, the new and better Jonah.

[32 : 52] That's the ultimate point of this book. The cost of God's mercy is the cost of the death of a better than Jonah in the New Testament. How could God forgive the Ninevites?

Well, how could God forgive you? In the case of the Ninevites, he looks forward. In the case of us, he looks backward. At what the better prophet did in the worst belly of the well, the true depths of Sheol.

I'll just close with this. If you are exploring the claims of faith today on the one hand, if you're exploring this religion and Christianity and whether Jesus might mean something truly, or on the opposite hand, if you were actually doing what Jonah did, and you've been part of the public people of God your whole life, and you've always run from God, which is easy to do by maintaining reputation and attending and not ever having to face the real questions of life and death.

Either way, I just want you to see two things. The first is that this is an old, old, ancient story. And no matter what you think about it, it was written hundreds of years before a man in the first century, on the grounds of historical fact, died on a Roman cross, and his followers professed and announced him to be risen from the dead three days later.

This story was written hundreds of years before that. A story about a man who would go to the grave and rise again three days later. Not to mention the next generation of stories, Isaiah 53, about a man who would be crushed and pierced for our transgressions, 700 years prior to the man Jesus Christ.

[34 : 46] That has immense prophetic power, and you have to grapple with that if you're exploring the claims of faith. It can't be gotten around when these texts were written and the amenity of their prophetic power.

And that means that the truth of Christianity revealed in this prophecy is that it is completely unique. It is unlike any other religion that has ever existed.

Jonah couldn't even grasp it. That God will forgive sinners when they ask for it. Because he killed God to give it to them.

There's nothing else like it. There never has been. And that's an invitation. It was an invitation to Jonah at the end of this passage, and it's an invitation to you. Be like the pagan sailors.

Not like Jonah. Because the pagan sailors, when they saw the man go down into the depths and the storm calm, they turned and said, oh Lord Yahweh, the personal name of God, and they vowed to him.

[35 : 51] And they repented. When they saw the prophet go to the grave for them. Let's pray. Father, we give thanks to you for the gospel in the Old Testament.

We ask, O Lord, that you would open our hearts to faith into mercy. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.