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The Book of Jonah, A Survey, Part 3

When last we looked at this book, Jonah had received a call from God to preach a message of warning to the pagan city of Nineveh. Yet he deemed it an undesirable calling, and so he quit the ministry and chose to retire to Spain.

En route, the Lord sent a storm against the ship which culminated in Jonah preaching the gospel to a group of pagan sailors who turned from their sin unto God. Jonah eventually was thrown overboard where a large fish swallowed him and so preserved him alive. Here Jonah was brought to the end of himself.

After all of this he vowed to serve the Lord. Then the fish then spit the prophet back on land where we pick up the story in our passage.

Jonah's Second Call, Jonah 3:1-3

Jonah 3:1-3a, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord..."

Except for the exclusion of the phrase, "son of Amittai," this passage is virtually identical with Jonah's initial call in Jonah 1:1-2. There are however two exceptions; the first is that unlike the initial calling of God Jonah here "arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord."

Now we are back on track and reading what is expected when God calls a man to ministry: immediate and whole-hearted compliance "according to the word of the Lord!" Truly when God calls a man to ministry, the passion and concern of the minister must be doing God's work in God's way. That is always the Biblical standard!

The second difference between this call and Jonah's initial call is in the little word, "to" of Jonah 3:2.

Jonah 3:2, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim TO it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."

In Jonah 1:2, God commanded Jonah to speak against the city. Here he is called to speak to it. Already the grace and mercy of God was being extended to this city in that God's judgment by this time was abating in anticipation of their repentance.

So Jonah boldly and confidently fulfills God's calling to minister to a Gentile city which according to God's standards; was considered to be "great."

Jonah 3:3b, "...now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk."

The text literally reads, "a great city to God." A common way in Scripture to indicate a superlative is to bring that which is being stressed in relation to God. For example: in our natural state, how important are we really? Notice the answer in Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:22a, "It is He who sits above the vault of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers..."

At times man/kings/rulers/judges may look rather impressive. Yet when compared to God, we see them for what they really are; grasshoppers!

When Nineveh was brought into association with God the conclusion was that it was "great to God." This is really saying something! Obviously God in His providence allowed at this time a magnificent city to arise out of the desert. So great was it that it took three days to cross; which according to Herodotus made the metro-plex somewhere between 50 and 75 miles in diameter. (Rawlinson, Rawlinson, & Wilkinson, 1862, p. 166)¹ Now according to ancient standards, this was unbelievable. Speaking of Nineveh, the first century B.C. Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, commented on the size of Nineveh as recorded in ancient literature:

No one afterward built a city of such compass or with walls so magnificent.

This is quite a statement coming from a man who had witnessed some of the incredible cities which existed at this time in Greece. From all of this it is obvious that God intended this city to be a monument to His grace and glory. As such, He enabled a sinful people to construct this metropolis so that God's glory might be declared and proclaimed at this time!

So Jonah has received for a second time a prophetic calling to preach a message of warning in Nineveh, a calling he now is all too happy to fulfill. Having just been spit out on land, Jonah traversed the 500 miles which separated Nineveh from Palestine, a journey which would have taken upwards to a month on foot. That brings us to Jonah and the Ninevites.

Jonah and the Ninevites, Jonah 3:4-10.

Jonah 3:4, "Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'"

It is obvious from this that Jonah did not wait until he entered into the heart of the city to preach. Rather, as soon as he arrived at the outer limits of the metropolis, he began to proclaim the word of the Lord, namely "...in 40 short days, Nineveh would be overturned."

As we have seen, this book is masterfully written so that we know much more took place than what is written. In light of this, we take the message recorded here as a synopsis; the prophet no doubt said much more. Yet the essence of his message was that doom awaited the city unless its inhabitants repented.

At this point we note what every Jew reading this would have seen and what those in Nineveh would have missed. The word for "overthrow" in this passage is the same word used in Scripture for (1) the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25), and (2) the turning from ones wicked ways unto God (Lamentations 4:6 and Amos 4:11). And here we have here another pun, "If Nineveh did not turn from their sin, God would turn them over to destruction (as He did Sodom and Gomorrah)."

So what did Nineveh do? How did they respond to the preached word? Notice the next section; it too is filled with irony.

Jonah 3:5, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them."

You must see that there is a strong comparison being drawn here between Nineveh and the crew on board the ship (there are many parallels between the repentance of the city and the conversion of the sailors). Note that the repentance of chapter 1 was meant to elicit our compassion toward the crew of the ship:

- How much had they lost on account of a Jewish prophet who wished for nothing less than their condemnation?
- Yet how diligently did they labor to protect Jonah?
- What a delight it is therefore to read about their obvious conversion to the worship and service of Yahweh!

It should be noted however that the citizens of Nineveh fell short of converting to the worship of God. Unlike in Jonah 1:16 where we read that the sailors “feared Yahweh” (God’s covenant name), the inhabitants of Nineveh only come to “reverence God” (Elohim, a title stressing His sovereignty). Regardless, on account of the similarity between these two chapters, we, the audience, have an affinity for these wicked people. The book was written to produce that in us! In fact, notice that the response of the Ninevites is here presented in terms of what God expected from His own people!

Exodus 14:31, “And when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses.”

Though the people of Nineveh here come short of believing in Yahweh, nevertheless their response of Nineveh typifies the response that God wants from His people when it comes to their sin! This is the exhortation of Jehoshaphat to the people of God when the combined forces of Ammon, Moab, and Meunites invaded Judah:

2 Chronicles 20:20, “And they rose early in the morning and went out to the wilderness of Tekoa; and when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, ‘Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the Lord your God, and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed.’”

There is grave irony in that — as we’ll see from Hosea and Amos — Israel at the time of the writing of Jonah was embroiled in great sin for which they would receive the call to repent... a wickedness from which, unlike Nineveh, they would not turn! With this the text turns its focus to the “captain” of Nineveh, clearly the counterpart to the captain of the ship on which Jonah sailed.

Jonah 3:6-9, “When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth [most likely made of goats hair], and sat on the ashes. And he issued a proclamation and it said, ‘In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?’”

There is much in the response of the king of Nineveh that is striking:

- His divesting of his royal grandeur.

- His clothing of himself with sackcloth; his sitting in ashes- both of which denoted great mourning.
- His call upon man and beast to turn in mourning unto God- IOW, this wasn't a superficial conviction; it went deep into their core!
- His exhortation for all to call urgently upon God- which parallels the sailor's urgent calling upon God in Jonah 1:6, 14 as well as Jonah's in 2:2.
- His calling for lovingkindness and compassion to be given to all, great and small.

Yet I want you to notice an important pun which Jonah weaves into this passage. In Jonah 3:7 the king issued a decree for neither man nor beast to "taste" or "eat" a thing. Consider both of these words:

- *Taste*: טָעַם (*tā'am*); has the same root consonants as the noun for "proclamation" or "decree" (Jonah 3:2).
- *Eat*: רָעָה (*rā'â*); is linked to the adjective used throughout this book for the word "evil" [רָעָה (*rā'ac*)] which has been the cause of the judgment that has or will come upon the sailors, Jonah, and Nineveh (Jonah 1:10, 16; 4:2, 6).

By NOT "tasting or eating" the entire population was to identify themselves with the "proclamation" of God's judgment on account of their "wickedness"! It was not enough for them to conceptualize the wrath of God; this king wanted the entire city to experience it to a limited degree! In other words, *God doesn't need to punish us; we are punishing ourselves!*

The king's decree ends with a striking statement on the nature of God's grace and forgiveness: In a sentence, "It is unconditional!"

Jonah 3:9, "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?"

Upon a first reading this sounds like the king wasn't sure whether the repentance of Nineveh would be enough to forestall God's wrath, as if the two were related. In truth, the statement is a strong proclamation as to the nature of Divine forgiveness: It is not earned; it is given as a gift! This is a declaration that God cannot be manipulated: *we are going to repent, but this does not necessitate God forgiving us! That is up to Him!* This is an important statement which Jonah himself was soon to neglect. Yet for now notice this:

Jonah 3:10, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it."

The text literally reads that God "turned/repented" from the calamity which was promised for the city. Yet this ought not to bother anyone. First, in Hebrew fashion, this is a pun. As Nineveh "turned" from their sin, so God "turned" from His judgment. This certainly does not imply that God

changed; for He can't.

Numbers 23:19a, "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent..."

Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday and today, *yes* and forever."

Malachi 3:6, "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."

Secondly, part and parcel of every prophecy of judgment given by God in the Old Testament is an element of implied conditionality; unless expressly stated otherwise. For example:

Jeremiah 18:7-8, "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy *it*; [BUT] if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."

Truly God is said here to "turn" from His judgment, but that is only because the people who received the message of judgment themselves had turned! We must see that God's "relenting" does not reflect a change in God, BUT the just response of an Unchanging Being to a situation that has changed! With this we are brought to the anger of Jonah which once again was roused on account of God's grace and compassion.

Jonah's Anger and God's Gracious Response, Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah 4:1, "But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry."

As we look at this book as a whole, we note that Nineveh's mourning and repentance corresponds to the events which surrounded Jonah's time in the belly of the fish (Jonah 1:17-2:10). There is an obvious contrast being presented here between:

1. The JOY of the prophet upon being rescued from the heart of the fish- recall Jonah 2:8-9 and his euphoric praise on account of the "salvation which comes from the Lord God!"
2. The ANGER of the prophet upon beholding the temporal "salvation" which God gave to the Ninevites!

When viewed together, we (the audience) are to see that Jonah's reaction to the grace granted to Nineveh is reprehensible! Jonah essentially says, *"I love the grace of God provided it is only experienced by me. But when given to someone whom I deem unworthy, then I lament it!"*

Once again we have a significant word-play/pun. The text literally reads that in response to God's grace, "It was evil to Jonah, a great evil." What a contrast. Whereas Nineveh turned away from its "evil" such that the "evil" planned for the city was withdrawn, Jonah now is filled with "evil." While God has turned from anger, Jonah now has turned to anger!

Why is Jonah angry?

Jonah 4:2, “And he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please Lord, was not this what I said [literally “my word” in contrast to “God’s word” which came to the prophet in Jonah 1:1; 3:1] while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.’”

“God’s word” for Jonah was to “declare judgment to Nineveh!” “Jonah’s word” back to God was, “But if I do, You in Your compassion will forgive!” Focusing here on “his word” that has gone unfulfilled, Jonah is moved to anger. Note further that Jonah is quoting the words of Exodus 34:6-7 where God is said to be a compassionate and gracious God.²

So why is Jonah angry? Because of God’s gracious character! This whole ordeal has revealed a side of God that Jonah doesn’t like; He is loving! His love knows no bounds! For us this may not seem like a big deal, but it was for Judaism at this time. God in His compassion was not willing for His people to sport such an ugly attitude. As such, His providence in Jonah’s life took an incredible turn.

Jonah 4:5a, “Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it.”

As Nineveh was built in the middle of a desert, the place where Jonah sat in order to watch what he hoped would be a Sodom and Gomorrah-type destruction would have been rather hostile.

Jonah 4:5b, “There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.”

The words used here for “made a shelter” are one and the same as what the Israelites were to build for themselves during the feast of Tabernacles, Leviticus 23:40-42. We conclude that Jonah chopped a couple of branches from a tree and made a tent-like dwelling to shield himself from the sun. Yet in this environment, the leaves of the branches which Jonah made into a shelter would not have lasted long before they shriveled up and fell to the ground.

Jonah 4:6a, “So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort.”

This most likely is a double-entendre. The word for “discomfort” is the word for “evil.” So either the plant was ordained by God to ease

1. The discomfort of Jonah on account of the heat of the sun, or
2. The discomfort that Jonah was experiencing on account of his own sin.

The text is not clear. Regardless at this point when the leaves of the tree-limbs withered, God appointed a vine-like plant to grow up on the skeletal structure of the tent/tabernacle that Jonah

erected.

Jonah 4:6b-7, “And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered. And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind.”

Once again this is an act of grace on the part of God whereby He tempered Jonah unto his growth in grace.

Jonah 4:8, “and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die...”

There are three things which stick out in this passage. It is obvious that Jonah sat down east of the city and watched in the hopes that God might look upon him, be moved in compassion, and so destroy the city! That’s the idea of the text. By sitting down opposite the city and waiting, Jonah is trying to manipulate God into destroying Nineveh!

- *Lord, I know you love me and I want the city to be destroyed.*
- *I’m watching; don’t let me down!*

Yet how did chapter 3 end again? It ended with the profound statement of the pagan king of Nineveh.

Jonah 3:9, “Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?”

In other words, God cannot be manipulated! He does what He pleases, not what pleases man! What a contrast! Once again in the words of Boice:

Non-Christians never look better than when they are compared with some Christians. (Boice, 2006, p. 225)

The pagan king knew he couldn’t manipulate God. Yet that didn’t stop Jonah from trying! Jonah is guilty of transforming the grace and so the salvation of God into a personal religion of self-help. This text goes to great lengths to demonstrate the incredible confusion of Jonah on account of God’s grace. To the prophet it seemed capricious on account of his assumption that God wanted him to be happy.

Consider it from Jonah’s flawed perspective.

- *God is a being who wants all people to be happy including the Ninevites. This means if I do what God wants, Nineveh will be forgiven. And quite frankly that won’t make me happy.*
- *So in the name of my own personal happiness, I quit the ministry and planned to retire on the east shores of Spain. But God wouldn’t allow it and so sent a severe storm against the boat which made the sailors on board unhappy.*

- *This resulted in my being thrown overboard which calmed the waves and so made the sailors happy, but me quite unhappy as a large fish swallowed me alive!*
- *In fact in my unhappiness I cried to God who heard me and so delivered me from my unhappiness.*
- *Now happy to be a prophet of the Lord again, I proclaimed God's judgment and anxiously awaited the destruction of Nineveh- a destruction which I knew would come because that would make me happy.*
- *But the destruction never came. Instead to make the Ninevites happy, God relented, and this made me unhappy.*
- *But God was watching out for me. For in the moment of my unhappiness He sent a plant to shield me from the sun. This made me very happy.*
- *But the next day, God appointed a worm to eat the plant. The plant died and this made me really unhappy- you see, I loved that plant!*
- *To make matters worse, God then appointed a scorching east wind and it made me miserable.*
- *So which is it God: Do you want me happy or unhappy?! Is this about me or not?! What do you want?-*

See Jonah addresses the titanic struggle that sometimes is waged on the part of sinners between their will and God's will! This leads to another shocking truth. Jonah considered the bitter providences of God to be a form of persecution on account of his own personal godliness. The statement Jonah made twice in this chapter concerning his desire to die (Jonah 4:4, 8b) is taken from the mouth of Elijah when he was fleeing from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:4! The prophet thought that he had lived to see a day when the genuine worship of Yahweh had come to an end. Thus, he wanted to die.

That makes this the second time Jonah quoted an Old Testament passage in this chapter, the first being Exodus 34:6-8!

Do you see what Jonah is thinking with this latter quotation? He has become like Elijah! Just as Elijah lived to see a day when God's worship was all but gone, so Jonah lived to see the day when God extended His love beyond Israel! Just as Elijah was persecuted on account of his fidelity to God, so Jonah obviously thought that he was being persecuted by God on account of his- Jonah's- high standards when it came to those whom God should love. Dr. Alexander put it this way speaking of Jonah:

Although he had offered God the opportunity to reverse his decision regarding the future of the Ninevites, God has merely demonstrated how absurd and incomprehensible he really is. His behavior is totally inconsistent. One minute he brings comfort, the next he brings destruction. Jonah can see no rationale to all this... If God must act so perversely, then Jonah sees no point in continuing to live; he would be better off dead. (Alexander, Baker, & Waltke, 2009, p. 130)

Jonah obviously was a confused individual (but so is everyone who fights against God's

providence). Yet God in His grace was not willing to allow him to remain there. Accordingly He approached Jonah again.

Jonah 4:9-11, “Then God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?’ And he said, ‘I have good reason to be angry, even to death’ [again quoting Elijah!!!]. Then the Lord said, ‘You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand as well as many animals?’”

In other words, they don't have God's word to direct and guide them; their moral compass is broken; ought I not to have compassion on them? What an incredible ending to an incredible prophecy as God highlights where the real absurdity lies, it is with Jonah and at times the people of God! Jonah is filled with compassion for a plant, a small part of creation from which he personally benefited. And he indicts God on account of His lack of care for this plant. Well what about God's care for 120,000 people whom He raised up not in a night, but over the course of many, many years? Ought He not to extend grace and compassion to them?

Truly the absurdity lies NOT with God BUT a prophet who valued a weed over the souls of 120,000 people! Now if this weren't enough for this tree-hugging prophet, God ends this book with one more element of incentive; had Jonah got his way and Nineveh was destroyed, many animals would also have lost their lives as well. If Jonah is going to continue to live unto his own happiness which at this point in his life clearly revolved around creation, what impact would the death of so many furry friends have on him? Truly it is in his best interest that Nineveh survive, if not for the people, then certainly the animals!!

This is the incredible story of Jonah. Yet we are out of time. Next time we will consider a few of the obvious messages contained in this portion of God's word.

Endnotes

¹ Herodotus defined a day's march to be 200 stadia, or 23 miles (8.7 stadia per mile) for a pedestrian. There is some debate about this since the translators don't know whether or not this was for soldiers on horses or for runners.

² In fact it was this truth about God that was on the hearts and minds of God's people at the time. “The compassion of God” is a major theme of Hosea (cf. Hosea 3:1-5; 11:1-11; 14:1-4)!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 5, 2010. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.