

Major Messages from the Minor Prophets The Book of Jonah

Intro: This year I am presenting a lesson each month on one of the Minor Prophets. All the lessons so far have been on Sunday night. We're considering them in chronological order, as best that can be determined. So we've looked at the prophecies of Obadiah & Joel. Today let turn to the account of the minor prophet with which we are most familiar—The book of Jonah.

What's the book of Jonah about? What major message does this minor prophet hold for us? Many answers are given to that question, depending upon how one reads the book. So maybe we should start there.

How should the book of Jonah be understood?

Not a few interpreters have concluded that we should read the book of Jonah as a piece of fiction—an allegorical tale, a romance novel designed to convey some idea about Israel's struggles as a nation. These conclusions are reached in part because of doubt concerning the great fish that swallowed Jonah and spit him out on the land. So the question is..

Was Jonah a real historical person?

Is the report about him in the book of Jonah historical?

Could a fish exist large enough to swallow a man and could he survive?

The first question may simply be answered by noting that the writer of 2 Kings acknowledges the prophetic work of Jonah, son of Ammitai, in predicting the successes of his contemporary ruler, Jeroboam II:

He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:25)

The second question may be answered by noting that twice Jesus Christ acknowledged the historicity of the account of Jonah. Let's consider one of them:

"The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Luke 11:32)

The third question may be answered by simply answered by asking whether you spell your "god" with a "lower case" or "capital" G. A god who can create a world out nothing including the great sea-monsters of deep could surely "prepare" one to accomplish His purposes for Jonah. Unless one is prepared to reject all miracles out of an anti-supernatural bias, there is no reason to believe that this is merely a big fish tale!

So, in view of these considerations we should read Jonah as a historical narrative reporting the real experiences of Jonah in relation to his prophetic call to prophesy against Nineveh. But what is the message?

Let's review the account together

Just a quick refresher on the story line of Jonah

God appears to Jonah and urges him to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and preach against it. Jonah resists the commission because he does not want God to save this wicked nation that held such a threat to his own people, the Jews. Jonah boards a ship for Tarshish to avoid compliance only to realize that he cannot so easily abandon his commission. God sends a storm on the Mediterranean; the sailors identify Jonah as the cause of what they perceive to be divine intervention and Jonah is forced to acknowledge his disobedience, suggesting that the only solution is to throw him overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a great sea-monster or fish prepared by God for this purpose and from the stomach of the great fish Jonah cries out to the Lord for deliverance. God hears Jonah's prayer and he is vomited out of the fish's belly and accepts the commission to go to Nineveh. He passed three days through the city proclaiming its destruction if repentance is not forthcoming; and the people of Nineveh listen to him and repent in sackcloth and ashes. But Jonah is displeased. He builds a booth for himself and sits outside the city watching to see what will happen. While there a gourd or other vine grows over his hut and gives him shade, which pleases him very much. However, a worm comes and devours the plant and Jonah is angry beyond description. God speaks to Jonah revealing to him that he had compassion for a plant, but apparently didn't have much compassion for the people of Nineveh. Thus, God reveals His compassion for the innocent children and animals of that city as well as the penitent people of Nineveh in contrast to the righteous indignation of Jonah toward one of Israel's enemies.

What is message of the book of Jonah?

One common outline of Jonah goes something like this:

Jonah running away from God.

About our duty to God. (Clear, distasteful, avoided, inescapable) You can run but you can't hide

Jonah running to God

God forgives the penitent and delivers them from their sin

Jonah running with God

Compliance with God's will brings blessings

Jonah running ahead of God

About our attitude toward the lost (whether we ascribe to Jonah a narrow & prejudiced exclusivism or an overzealous patriotism, his attitudes were wrong!)

But is this really the message of the book of Jonah? Yes, the story of Jonah reveals some important things about our attitudes and relationship with God; but I submit that the book of Jonah is not about Jonah. Instead he is a prop in the story and not the focus of the message.

May I suggest a little different approach? May I suggest another outline?

God's gracious purpose for Nineveh

I submit that the message of the book of Jonah is not about Jonah! Instead the hero of the story is God and the message is one of the profoundest importance. Our God, the God of Israel, (the God who many view as being presented as a God ready to fry the opposition in a NY second when they disobey) is here in the OT presented as a loving, gracious, compassionate God who does not seek the destruction of anyone, but the salvation of all. And we see Him in the first chapter purposing his grace for the wicked people of Nineveh.

God's gracious patience with Jonah

Jonah himself is the object of God gracious love. He as a prophet of God knew who He was and of His great power as God to protect His people. Yet in spite of this knowledge He turned from the Lord's commission and sought to avoid the call to which the Lord had given him. Yet even so, God was gracious and compassionate to him! Could God have not let Jonah drown in the Mediterranean and picked another prophet to do His preaching? But instead he graciously rescues His resistant child and brings Him from the depths of the sea. And He speaks to Him "a second time".

God's gracious pardon of Nineveh

But the grace that Jonah experienced was but a microcosm of the larger grace God had for the whole human race. There was nothing in the Ninevites that caused them to deserve the opportunity for repentance God gave them. They had been cruel and merciless to others; but even so, God sent the prophet to them at a time when the message might have had the best reception and urged them to repent lest they be destroyed.

God's gracious proclamation of Himself

And then when that prophet still becomes angry that God's mission has succeeded and the Ninevites are not destroyed, He once again patiently and graciously reveals His compassion. The motivation? Nothing more than God's desire that the innocent children and animals that He had created not be destroyed and that the wicked might turn to Him in repentance.

God's message for people today!

The book of Jonah reveals the heart of God toward His creation. He is not aloof and detached from them; but loves them and seeks their salvation. He does not "take pleasure in the death of the wicked". The story of Jonah in the OT prepares the way for the gospel message of God's universal love and offer of forgiveness to the least deserving.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

God gave the people of Nineveh a sign--Jonah's three days and three nights in the sea-monster? It was a sign to the people of Nineveh that this messenger came with a message from God—a message of both destruction and salvation. Without repentance there would be destruction but with it there would be forgiveness and blessing. And in just the same way Jesus reveals that the “sign of Jonah” had its counterpart in Him.

But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:39-40)

To what does the miracle of the resurrection point as a sign? That Jesus, like Jonah, is an authentic prophet with a message of both destruction and salvation. Without repentance there will be destruction, but with it there can be forgiveness and blessing.

Conclusion: Our presence here today affirms the truths of the message of Jonah. Someone greater than Jonah has come to us! We gather on the day of His resurrection, God's sign that He is the Christ. And we break bread, God's memorial to His sacrifice for all mankind. And together these proclaim the grace and mercy of God to sinful men. Today we glory in a God who gives bad men second chances!

I hope that you can identify with the man who ran from God and learn from his mistakes; but I hope more than you can identify with a God whose compassion and grace reaches out to us every day, forgiving us our transgressions and providing the motivation to become more like Him, to care about everybody around us, to do everything in our power to speak a word about the grace of God to everyone we can and bring men to Him, no matter how wicked they may be!