

Jonah

Teaching us to align our thinking and living
with the purposes of the Sovereign and Merciful God!

Jonah is one of the “minor prophets” (the last twelve books of the Old Testament), not because his book is less important than any of the other prophets, but because it is a relatively short book; containing only 1236 words broken down into four brief chapters. This book has much to teach both the believer in Jesus Christ and the person who has not yet come to know Him. The book of Jonah has much to teach each of us about the greatness of the character of God. It also teaches us about the sinfulness of the heart of man and how this heart condition affects man’s behavior. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

As we come to the book of Jonah, it is easy for us to stand by and say: “Shame, shame on Jonah for having behaved as badly as he did.” Here the Lord had given him a task to do and he went in the opposite direction and refused to do it! Jonah teaches us to consider the Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) we ourselves have received. Are we obeying this command? Too often we have believed the lie which tells us either we don’t have the ability to speak to others about Jesus or we don’t have anything to say to them. Nothing could be further from the truth for a person who has received salvation from sin and the wrath of God only by the mercy and grace of God!

It would be good for us to stop and consider why Jonah went the other way when the Lord told him to go and preach against the great city of Nineveh. This consideration would help identify the prejudices we are practicing (maybe even without realizing it) against the people all around us who need to hear the message of God’s grace.

It would be better if we would look at the prophet Jonah and see ourselves for who we really are: *a stiff-necked, stubborn, and rebellious people* who have behaved much like this prophet, Jonah. The evidence of this is that we have not loved God as we ought as demonstrated in our lack of compassion, love and care for our “neighbor.” (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37)

How wonderful it is then, to see “...*the word of the LORD [come] to Jonah a second time...*” (3:1). The mercy of God toward this rebellious prophet is precisely what we need! We should be grateful the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time. While we should NEVER presume upon the mercy of God, we should be thankful we have had the joy of hearing about it again today...for we need it desperately!

The revival which takes place in the great and wicked city of Nineveh is a demonstration of God’s greatness and power to change the stubborn evil hearts of men, no matter what country they are from! We would think that seeing the transformation of heart in the Ninevites as a result of his preaching would have thrilled Jonah. Instead we see the racism and the deeply-seated prejudice in Jonah’s heart, in spite of the mercy and grace which had been extended to him. (cf. Matt. 18:21-35)

As the LORD God provided the fish to swallow Jonah, He also provides a vine “...*to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort...*,” (4:6) even as Jonah waited for the LORD to destroy the Ninevites. The LORD God also provided a worm to take the vine (and consequently the shade) away from Jonah. Then the LORD God sent a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. It is clear from this book the LORD God is not interested in the comfort of His people as much as He is interested in them having hearts in tune with what He is doing.

My prayer for each one of us today is that as a result of the time we spend in the book of Jonah our thinking and our living will be aligned with the purposes of the Sovereign and Merciful God.

Clarity regarding the city of Nineveh and its people

1. It was a great city...it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire
2. It was wicked (evil ways)
3. It was violent
4. The inhabitants practiced witchcraft
5. Murder was rampant
6. Prostitution was prevalent in this city
7. Drunkenness characterized the behavior of the Ninevites
8. The Ninevites were known as cruel people
9. The Ninevites were a proud people

“We can understand the geography and Jonah’s motives if we can imagine the word of the Lord coming to a Jew who lived in New York during World War II, telling him to go to Berlin to preach to Nazi Germany, and instead of this, he goes to San Francisco and takes a boat for Hong Kong.” Boice, James Montgomery. The Minor Prophets, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983), p. 266

What does Jonah teach us?

1. Jonah teaches us how foolish it is to run from God;
2. Jonah teaches us how to pray
3. Jonah teaches us the joy of having a front row seat to watch the work of the Spirit of God!
4. Jonah teaches us how selfish and out of touch with God’s plan even a prophet (or a preacher) can be!

Several truths about God taught clearly in the book of Jonah

1. God has the authority to send His messengers wherever He wants them to go;
2. God takes notice of the wicked (those NOT aligned with Him) and will do something about their disobedience (sooner OR later);
3. God will use whatever means necessary to get His messengers to go wherever He wants them to go, no matter what the messenger wants to do;
4. God is the Maker of the sea and the land;
5. God, according to His will, chooses to exercise His mercy toward His disobedient servants, though this should NEVER be expected or put to the test.
6. God is the Initiator of salvation;
7. God has the authority to accomplish His purposes through His creatures;
8. God has the power to bring the most wicked person or persons to Himself;
9. God is a gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and will have compassion on whomever He chooses to have compassion (cf. Exodus 34:5-9);
10. God specializes in saving people from every nation, tribe and language (cf. Rev. 5:6-14; Rev. 7:1-12).

Several truths the life of Jonah teaches us about ourselves:

1. We might hate the people to whom God sends us so much we don't want to go!
2. The sense of "peace" we may have could be false (as evidenced by Jonah's sleeping through the storm);
3. Our words and our actions often are not good reflections of the God we claim to worship and serve.
4. It is possible for us to know truth and not practice it...but NOT without consequence.
5. It is possible for us to obey God, but not have the right attitude in doing so.
6. Too frequently, what displeases and angers us is not that which makes bothers the Lord;
7. Too frequently, what pleases and makes us happy is not that which displeases and angers the Lord;
8. I need to be confronted with what seems obvious in order to grasp what is true and acceptable to God.

Personal Application

1. Identify the people in your life to whom you are refusing to take the message of God's mercy and grace; People in your neighborhood? People at your place of employment? People you encounter elsewhere?
2. Repent of your lack of urgency to obey the command of God to announce His message to those around you;
3. Identify and turn from specific sins
 - a. Lack of fear of God
 - b. Lack of trust in God
 - c. Lack of obedience
 - d. Self indulgence
 - e. Self-centeredness (pride)
 - f. Independence
4. Call out to the Lord from the depth of your despair.
5. Heed the words of the prophet Jonah and do not forfeit the grace that could be yours for idols that are worthless!!
6. Rejoice in the work of the Lord in saving people from every nation tribe and language!
7. Involve yourself in the work the Lord is doing among people (even those with whom you are not comfortable!)
8. Repent of your sinful attitudes about people who are different than you so you can fulfill your God-given role as "ambassador" to them.

Study Questions

1. What are the clearly identifiable commands of God to you? To the church?
2. In what ways have you been in rebellion against these clear commands?
3. Are there people to whom you would rather not take the message of God? How will you really know you are honestly answering this question?
4. In Jonah's prayer, what actions does he attribute to the hand of God? How are your ideas about God stretched by Jonah's affirmations in his prayer?
5. For what actions does Jonah take responsibility? Are there any actions in your life for which you have not yet taken responsibility? What are they? How will you deal with them?
6. In what evident ways did the people of Nineveh demonstrate their belief? In what evident ways do you demonstrate your belief?
7. What are the reasons for which you might be "greatly displeased" and become furious with God?
8. What "creature comforts" do you care about more than people? How would the LORD have you deal with these areas of your life?
9. What wrong ideas about God did Jonah have? How were these wrong ideas manifested practically? What wrong ideas about God do YOU have? How are they affecting your life? By God's grace, what steps will you take to change your thinking?