

Should I Not Pity Nineveh?

Jonah 1-4

Of all the minor prophets, this is the most popular.

- Most people know this story because of the fish.
- “Daddy, I want to read about Jonah swallowing the fish.”
- “The fish actually swallowed him.”
- I know a lot of men who eat fish! That’s not a big deal! Being swallowed by one is!
- They’re plenty accounts of that sort of thing – though I’ve managed to avoid them in 42 years.

**The book is not about a big fish;
it’s about God’s big compassion.**

My Subtitle: The Rebellious Prophet and the God of Compassion

Imagine a country filled with the most violent, vicious, and vile individuals that you could imagine. A country that was evil and powerful. A country of Bin Ladens, perhaps?

- **God says He will destroy them.**
- But then He sends you to preach to them saying “If they repent, I’ll withhold my judgment and mercifully save them.”
- You might like that first idea, but not the second!
- **Welcome to Jonah.**
- **Assyrians was the cruelest place on earth, and also the most powerful – but God tells Jonah to go preach repentance to them!**

The book of Jonah is moving toward 4:11, **Should I not pity Nineveh?**

- It leaves the reader with the question: **“Do I have God’s heart of compassion?”**
 - **Jonah did not.**
 - Jonah was too **ethnocentric**; too **nationalistic**; too **self-righteous**.
 - He **loved a disobedient Israel more than potentially repentant Nineveh**.

We learn from this book that God’s saving grace is not just for “us” but also for “them” – that is for our *enemies (whoever that is for you)*

We like God’s compassion when directed at us, but not so much when God shows compassion to our enemies.

We are meant to reflect on this book ... a book that doesn’t resolve.

- It ends with a question (like Nahum, 3:19).
- It’s a story of the sad life of this prophet.

Jonah’s name is appropriate – Dove.

- It came to be symbolic of *innocence* (NT).

- But in the 8th century BC Israel it was known for being “silly” or “senseless.” (Hos 7:11)

So as we read Jonah,

A. We are to look at ourselves

- Am I compassionate or ethnocentric? Heart for nations or nationalistic? Merciful or self-righteous?

B. We are to look at how God views the world and rules the world.

- “Jonah: Everything you ever wanted to know about a biblical worldview in 48verses.” (Paul Tripp).
- **God is sovereign**– Who here can grow a plant with his word!?
- **God is compassionate and gracious** showing saving love to Nineveh, and showing restoring love to Jonah.
 - Why not just let the Nineties be damned?
 - Why not just let Jonah die in the sea? He can get another prophet, right?
 - Because he is merciful gracious, slow to anger... compassionate.
 - He’s the God of unrelenting grace.
- **God is a missionary God** – He has a passion for the nations; he is not a tribal or national god, but the saving God of all nations. This is what we’re created for.

We have about 48 verses, so let’s go. I’m going to give you an outline, but also a main lesson from each chapter, with the climactic point being at the end.

#1: Jonah: Running from God (1:1-16)

1: Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. Jonah was prior to captivity. It takes place in 2 Kings 17. **He sees the storm clouds on the horizon.**

- 2 Kings 14:25 - he served during the time of Israel’s King Jeroboam II (786–746 BC).
- Jonah supported The king’s aggressive military policy to extend the nation’s influence.
- The readers knew Jonah to be intensely patriotic.
- He **hated** Nineveh and **feared** Nineveh. **God sending him there? The people would have been stunned.**

2: 3 imperatives: “**Arise.... Go... call out...**” Nineveh: It’s to the **Gentiles!**

3: God’s **prophet is rebellious.**

- “**from the presence of the Lord**” (3 times in chapter 1) — western rim of what Israelites knew
- Don’t miss the flow – **down, down, down.**
- **Disobedience is always a step downward.**

So, why is he running? He’s a prophet, right?

- It’s simple: He is **ethnocentric.**
 - He’s okay with preaching with sinners like him. But not them.

- **He was so filled with nationalistic pride that he actually took delight in the thought of other nations being wiped out.**
- “I’d rather those people go to hell.” (a guy said to David Platt)

4-6: He finds out that you **can’t run from the omnipresent God!**

- 5:** He goes down again
- He was fast asleep!

The world is going to hell, and God’s prophet is asleep!

- **It is easy to so cocoon yourself that you are oblivious to those who are perishing!**
- Beware of the suburban lullaby.
- You can retreat to your shire everyday and neglect the war in Moordor.

6: They woke him up.... The pagan sailors are desperate...

- 7: Prov 16:33.** We are not surprised that the lot fell to Jonah.
- He has been exposed.

8: They ask him **five** rapid-fire questions....

- 9:** Notice, Jonah **avoids the question on occupation!**
- He is rebellious so he wants to avoid the question.

- 10:** They know he is the cause
- **3rd time, “fleeing from the presence of the Lord.”**

11-12: Jonah gives them a course of action

- 13: Surprisingly they don’t throw him overboard immediately.**
- **But the Lord will not let them get to land.**

14-16: Pagan Gentile sailors are more open to the promptings of the Lord than Jonah.

14: This is a great confession of faith in God’s sovereignty (Ps 115:3; 135:6).

- 16:** Fear the Lord.
- A general fear (v. 5)
 - It intensified, “exceedingly afraid (v. 10)
 - It matured into a fear of the Lord (v. 16)

- 16:** vows. This is what people who fear the Lord do in Scripture.
- 2 Kings 17:32–36; Ps. 22:5; 61:5; 76:11

Lesson #1: You can run but you can't hide from God's presence.

- Does Psalm 139 not teach us this?
- Jonah illustrates it
- It can be a great comfort when you are in a hard place.
- It can be a greater warning when you are in the wrong place.
- **Matt Carter's story: cancer, friend's funeral, death threat, crash – Ross, Jon 1:3-4**
- **“Important safety tip: Don't run from God's calling.”**
- There is often grace in the storm – he draws us back to him.

#2: Jonah: Rescued by God (1:17-2:10)

17: Notice **it doesn't say a “whale” but a great fish.**

- The Hebrew word is “**dag**” which is **not limited to what we call a fish today**; but is a general word referring to an **aquatic beast**.
- It could have been a **supernaturally appointed fish, created for this specific purpose.**
- I take the story as **historical**, as Jesus did. Some think it is mythical or allegorical.
- As Christians we believe in the **supernatural**.

“three days and three nights.

- Jesus likened the time between his own death and resurrection to Jonah's time in the fish (Matt. 12:40).

“If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally. Certainly many people today believe all miracles are impossible, but that skepticism is just that—a belief that itself cannot be proven. Not only that, but the text does not show evidence of the author having made up the miracle account. A fiction writer ordinarily adds supernatural elements in order to create excitement or spectacle and to capture reader attention, but this writer doesn't capitalize on the event at all in that way. The fish is mentioned only in two brief verses and there are no descriptive details. It is reported more as a simple fact of what happened. So let's not get distracted by the fish.” (Keller)

2:1. Jonah's Prayer: Sometimes people say “God sent the fish to swallow Jonah to **punish** him.”

- **No! He sent the fish to save him! To rescue him!**
- **It was for his salvation, his education, and his transportation!**
- **He finally prays! He didn't pray previously when the sailors asked him.**
- **When the psalm was recorded is unclear, but the subject of the poem is clear.**

***This prayer is not a prayer for rescue;
it's a prayer of thanks for God's rescue.***

It's not “get me out of this fish,” but thank you for sending this fish.

Verse 2 summarizes the prayer: Jonah called for help and God answered.

• *Psalm 107: they cried, he delivered.*

• **The Lord was gracious to Jonah and he was thankful; unfortunately he would not wish this same grace for his enemies.**

i. His Salvation (2-7)

2: Out of the belly of death he cried, and the Lord answered. (v. 2)

3-6a – we read more of his dreadful situation before the Lord's rescue

3: He knows though the Lord used the Sailors to throw him overboard, it was God's plan.

• 1:15

• Waters are used throughout Scripture for **judgment**

4-5: Look how bad this is: weeds wrapped around him, smelling like a fish!

- **the Lord can bring you out!**

6b-7: Salvation: "yet you brought up my life from the pit...I remembered the Lord"

ii. His Education (8-9)

• You learn some things in a belly of a fish where you wouldn't learn anywhere else! Ever learned a lot in a mess? Pain?

• We often learn grace best at the bottom, not at the top.

1. Don't bow down to idols. (v. 8)

• This refers to the pagan sailors, but it is also a message to Jonah's fellow idolatrous Israelites.

• He learns at the bottom that God alone is God.

• Those clinging to worthless idols forfeit their opportunity of grace.

2. Salvation belongs to the Lord. (v. 9).

• One of the great statements in the Bible!

• **Some have said the summarizing statement of Scripture, the message of the Bible.**

• 2 Tim 3 — wise for salvation.

• Which means he is not only free to save, he is free to save anyone – including the Ninevites.

• He learns that God alone saves. He learns of his impotence and God's omnipotence.

• And yet, we will see, that Jonah still hasn't allowed this statement to penetrate his heart deep enough... He doesn't want salvation for the Ninevites.

iii. His Transportation (10)

• That's exactly what it says in Hebrew: He vomited him out.

Lesson #2: Salvation belongs to the Lord.

• He rescues sinners from dreadful situations. He alone does this by his grace.

• **Sin belongs to us; salvation belongs to the Lord.**

- **Salvation doesn't belong to Americans, to good people, Smart People... God can save who he wants... Saul? Ruth? Rehab?**

#3: Jonah: Re-commissioned by God (3:1-10)

1: It came **a second time**. Praise God.

2: **Similar commission to 1:2 – three imperatives**. Slight change in *the third*.

- “the message I tell you” – God is very precise in what he wants Jonah to say.

3: Jonah obeys this time.

- The literal Hebrew is “**A city great to God**”
- The point is it was a city **important** to God. It was great to God.
- **He cared about it.**
- It was a city that was about to receive **great compassion from God!**
- **Some of you may go to hard places; take this with you and ask the Lord to give you his heart for the city.**

4: A Message of Divine Judgment. “**Overthrown**” same word for Sodom and Gomorrah.

- It sounds **unconditional**, but it was **conditional**. They **could repent**.
- Jonah knew there was the prospect of repentance (4:2)

5: The people **believed!** Surprise!

- “**believed**” is **the first word in the sentence showing how quickly they believed!**
- It is an identical statement to **Gen 15:6**. Like Abraham, they did not go through an elaborate ritual, but simply believed (cf., Rom 4-5)
- You may wonder sometimes, **what good is preaching? Evangelism?**
 - **Here is a text for you!**
 - Because salvation is of the Lord and not your smooth delivery, you can preach with expectation that God may indeed use you to save sinners!
 - They give evidence of repentance (v. 5)

6-9: A Repentant City

- It just said they were in sackcloth which probably means verses 5 and 6-9 are topical not chronological. Verses 6-9 gives a description of the whole city's response.
- Both tell the same response.

10: **God Withholding Judgment**. This was the kind of thing we read in **Joel 2:14**.

- **God is responsive to repentance.**
- We should not read into that heresies like open theism.
- **God controls the ends (withholding judgment) as well as the means (preaching repentance).**

Lesson #3: God is the God of Second Chances.

- God gives **Nineveh** another chance to repent.
Eventually he comes to an end of his patience, see Nahum.
- God gives **Jonah** another opportunity to serve him and preach the Word.
 - Like Peter who denied the Lord, but was then commissioned to preach in John 21.

This is a great transition to chapter 4.

- **There are many similarities between Jonah and the reluctant apostle Peter.**
- In fact, Peter's real name is Simon Bar-Jonah (Simon, son of Jonah, Matt 16:17).
- **The Lord commissioned both Jonah and Simon Bar-Jonah to carry His message to their enemies.**
- Both protested.
- **Peter was no more willing to mingle with the Gentiles than Jonah was with the Ninevites.**
- These protests happened in **Joppa**.
- But both withdrew their protests; Jonah after spending three days and nights in the belly of a great fish, and Peter after receiving an instructive vision repeated three times.
- After preaching God's message, God granted repentance to the outsiders.
- The positive response of the Ninevites provokes a hostile response of Jonah, which God corrects; and the positive response of Cornelius' household evokes an antagonistic response from others within traditional Israel, which God then corrects.

Both were sent to display God's heart for the nations.

- And both needed "a **missional conversion.**"
- **They needed to be broken over their prejudice and see the world the way God sees it.**
- **Peter did (though he had a lapse according to Gal 2)...**
- **We are left to wonder about Jonah**

#4: Jonah: Resentful Toward God (4:1-11)

Jonah has just participated in one of the great revivals in the history of the world.

- **But he's not thrilled; he's angry!**
- **Imagine giving a concert and receiving a standing ovation in front of a difficult crowd** — Jonah has preached to the toughest audience of his life and they all respond positively!
- **And he's angry. Why?**
- **His nationalistic pride; his racism, bigoted heart is on display.**

Jonah's problem was **not with his head.**

- **Jonah had great theology!**
- **His problem was with his heart.**

You can study the Bible, have everything lined up theologically; be as straight as a gun barrel on your orthodoxy, but have a heart that is cold toward people.

Knowledge without love puffs you up; it can just make you arrogant.

God hates pride.

“Jonah had a PhD in theology but he’s not even in grammar school when it comes to having the heart of God.” (Akin)

1: His angry.

2: We’re now informed a prior conversation that took place.

- **I knew what you are going to do! You are going to *save* them not *judge* them!**
- He quotes the great confession of **Ex 34:6-7**, which appears through the OT including the minor prophets.
- I know what kind of God you are!

3: He is the **sulking servant**.

- He asks for the Lord to kill him (not the only prophet who did this).
- **He is like the elder brother in the Prodigal Son**

4: God is more gracious than some of us are. How many of you have had it with Jonah at this point? **“God kill me.” Boom. “Your toast. Let me get another prophet!”**

- Instead he raises a question, **“Do you do well to be angry?”**
- Look at how compassionate God is.

5: “Maybe their repentance will be short lived and God will execute them. I’ll watch.”

6a: Commentators suggest a castor oil plant, which grows quickly and provides shade with its broad leaves.

6b: The only time in Scripture that Jonah is happy, exceedingly happy!

7: “Here today gone tomorrow” some think comes from this story.

- God appoints a **worm** to destroy the plant.
- **God is the hero, but a minor one is the worm!**

8: Scorching heat in the Middle East.

- “It is better for me to be dead.”

9: The Lord questions him again. “Do you do well to be angry over the plant?”

9b: yes. I’m so mad I could die.

10: Let’s do a cost assessment...

- **You pity a plant. You didn’t plant it. You didn’t make it grow. It came into being into a night and it perished in a night.**
- So you pity a plant.
 - **“Your concern first and foremost is with your comfort.”**
 - **“You are glad to serve me if you are comfortable.”**

- “You are glad to serve me if your agenda matches up with my agenda.”

11: In contrast, should I not pity Nineveh?

- **They have been so far removed from my word, they don't know of me and my ways, and my salvation.**
- It's a great example of much of today's world.
- “cattle” he cares for all his creation in his compassion. He will renew creation, and have a people for himself from all nations.

God created it all, Jonah created nothing.

The people had eternal significance; the plant was here today and gone tomorrow.

Jonah had a terrible set of priorities.

He cared more for a momentary pleasure more than people with souls.

Lesson #4: People matter to God; therefore, they should matter to us.

- God cares for the people of Nineveh, but Jonah cares for a plant.
- **You should care more about people than your comfort and your possessions.**
- Do you?
- **Do you care more about your car, than the people of Yemen? Or in your neighborhood?**
- **Do you care more about your comfort and security than the lost masses of people who don't know the Bible?**
- **Do you care more about your nation than the Lord Jesus' mission?**
- **Has your prejudice led you to pride and self-centeredness?**
- Who are “those people” for you?
 - Republicans? Democrats? Dark people? White people? Rich people? Immigrants? Homosexuals? Northerners?
 - God keep us from being Jonah.
 - One of the great problems with self-righteousness is this. You fail to see how desperately you need the grace of God.
 - you begin to measure you at your best next to people at their worst

Jonah isn't about a big fish!

It's about having a big heart for all the peoples of the earth.

This is what will make you a great missionary. A big heart.

Jonah is a powerful book for people in our context.

Lost people matter to God, therefore, they should matter to us.

- **Penn Gillette story — how much do you have to hate someone?**
- There are many impediments to the advancement of the gospel: opposition from the outside, or conflict on the inside; but here is another: our own hearts. We have to overcome lack of love and discrimination in order to be good missionaries.

Do they matter to you?

- 11:** The book concludes with this question: Should I not pity Nineveh?
- Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?
 - **Shouldn't you?** Yes.

Which will you choose?

- God's agenda or yours?
- My comfort or God's commission?
- Self-righteous heart or a heart of compassion?

One wonders what happened to Jonah, but my guess is that Jonah did finally receive this missional conversion since no one could have reported this story other than Jonah.

- And why would you make yours self look like this, unless there had been a change in your life — unless you were secure in God's love?

In any case, another Jonah would come, not a rebellious prophet, but the Lord Jesus, who said to an unbelieving audience about himself, "Someone greater than Jonah is here" (Matt 12:41)

- In his great compassion, our prophet, priest, and King, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, to make enemies his friends.
- He died for us to give us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.
- In compassion, on the cross, he said "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing" — they don't know their right hand from their left.
- He was buried, like Jonah in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights, and then rose again for our justification.
- He pitied us.
- He bled for us. He has saved us.
- He loves the nations; so should we.
- May we love this broken world, the way the Lord Jesus has loved us.
- Salvation is not just for "us" but for "them."
- After all, we were the them, undeserving of God's gracious salvation, but Christ came for us, so let's go to them