

The Gospel According to Jonah

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- [0 : 00] Well, it's been a while since we looked at the book of Jonah as a church, and my apologies for that.
- So I think before we read chapter four, I'll give you a brief overview of the story so far. I'm sure it's a story that we're all familiar with. Jonah is a prophet of God who has been commissioned to go and preach to Nineveh, which in Jonah's day, I think it's sort of seen as symbolic of the very worst of human sort of depravity and wickedness.
- Similarly to how maybe Sodom and Gomorrah is viewed in the Bible, or maybe Babylon as well, this is not a nice place, and Jonah doesn't like this idea.
- Instead of obeying the word of the Lord, he flees on a boat to Tarshish, which in Jonah's day again is the end of the world.
- There's nowhere further than you can go than Tarshish. So yeah, we're getting the sense that Jonah really doesn't want to do this. On his way to Tarshish, he boards a ship full of pagan sailors, and God sends a great storm.
- [1 : 25] The sailors suspect that there's maybe something different about the storm. There might be a divine cause behind it. And when Jonah is discovered to be the culprit of the storm, Jonah volunteers.
- His solution to the problem is to throw himself into the sea. And instead of death, as we'd expect, God provides a fish to swallow Jonah.
- And in the fish, Jonah prays to the Lord. During that prayer, he thanks him for being faithful to him. And from this point on, Jonah promises to God that he's going to be faithful.
- And the Lord responds to Jonah's prayer by vomiting Jonah back out and recommissioning him to go to Nineveh. Jonah's trip to Nineveh is a success.
- The city hears what Jonah has to say. And everyone in the city repents. Everyone from, you know, the most important people in the city, the king of Nineveh, has repented.
- [2 : 35] All the way down to the peasants and even the cows have repented. Which brings us to Jonah 4. And we might ask ourselves, you know, why is Jonah 4 even here?
- From the story of Jonah so far, we've sort of, it follows the logic of a good story. We've got a catastrophe. We have a sort of favorable resolution of events.
- Nineveh, a wicked city, has repented. And even Jonah has seemingly repented. We sort of have a happily ever after. Why is there another chapter?
- But I think chapter 4 is here to really give us a fuller picture. To help us understand the real meaning of the story of Jonah.
- Some of us may think that Jonah is just a nice story that we can tell our children before they go to bed. Or some of us, I remember a couple years ago, I watched through some Jordan Peterson lectures on psychological interpretations of biblical stories.
- [3 : 51] And he's got a couple lectures on Jonah. And his sort of interpretation of Jonah is Jonah is just this symbol of what happens when we run away from our responsibilities in life.

And, you know, God sort of uses suffering in our life to change us and transform us. And while some of his insights might be helpful, I think that's not the real point of the book of Jonah.

I don't think Jonah is a story we have which we can just get moral lessons from. I think the real meaning of the book of Jonah is it is we're supposed to read it and get the sense that something special is going to happen in redemptive history.

And I think when we have the sort of foundations laid of why the book is here in the first place, then I think the moral lessons can come after that.

So I'll read Jonah 4 for us now. I'll read from the end of chapter 3 to give us a bit of context. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

[5 : 11] But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city.

There, he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn, the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

He wanted to die and said, It would be better for me to die than to live. But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said.

And I am so angry, I wish I were dead. But the Lord said, You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend to it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

[6 : 50] And should I not be concerned for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals.

I have a couple friends who go out street preaching in Edinburgh. They went out just yesterday, in fact.

And usually what they'll do is they'll have a board, which will have a question on it, or maybe it'll have some pictures. And the point is to sort of illustrate a gospel message.

And they'll go out on the Royal Mile, which is a very busy street. So they'll have maybe hundreds of people who'll walk past the boards, maybe even thousands. Usually what happens is people tend to ignore them.

I think they would be fortunate if even a handful of people stopped by to listen for more than five minutes. And a lot of the time they can often be sort of the subject of some pretty harsh, you know, insults.

[8 : 00] And mockery. But I'd like you to imagine for a second if one day they went out to the Royal Mile, and suddenly everyone who walked past them stopped and started to listen to them.

And not just listen, but they were actually being changed by the message. And, yeah, let's say after they've heard the message, they go out and they tell other people.

And then they tell their friends and they tell their friends. And the message gets out to the club goes on Cowgate or to the people in pubs in Tyne Castle.

Even if the message got out to the Scottish Parliament and the next Sunday all the church pews in Edinburgh are full, I think the team would be absolutely delighted if that happened.

And it would be a miracle that they didn't think was possible. And I think if someone on the team was actually angry or upset that that happened, that they would be firmly rebuked by the team.

[9 : 18] They would think, you know, there's something seriously wrong with this person. How can you be angry that the city of Edinburgh has turned from their ways? But that is what we have in Jonah 4.

We have a prophet of God who has been used as God's instrument to bring about the greatest awakening that we have in the Old Testament.

But Jonah, there's something that is annoying him. He's angry. And this isn't just like a regular kind of anger.

There's sort of, there's an emphasis that's being added. The ESV would translate it, but it displeased Jonah exceedingly.

And he was angry. So listen, I don't know if you've ever spilt coffee on the carpet and your dad starts shouting at you. It's that kind of level of anger.

[10 : 17] It's not something that he can just keep to himself. It has to come out of him. And it comes out in his prayer to the Lord. He's sort of, he's talking us through his thought process and why he's so angry.

And it's revealed that he knows that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger.

And that is why he fled to Tarshish in the first place. So Jonah knew in chapter one that this was going to happen. That God was going to forgive the Ninevites. Here Jonah is quoting a very sort of common way of describing God in the Old Testament.

It first occurs in Exodus 34. And we all know the story of Exodus. God rescues the Israelites from the land of slavery.

And he calls them to, he's going to be their God and they are going to be his people. And he gives them a list of commands that they're supposed to follow. God is going to guide them to a land and they're going to live under him.

[11 : 32] And what are the first two commands? You shall have no other gods beside me and you shall not make idols. And what happens? The Israelites make the golden calf.

They do a couple of other things. But Israel, having just been delivered from the land of slavery, have so quickly turned from their God who redeemed them.

God could have not been compassionate to the Israelites. He could have just, you know, punished them or abandoned them. But instead, what he does is he renews his covenant with them.

And this is where we get this list of attributes. God is sort of saying, it's nothing that you Israelites have done that has caused me to save you or has redeemed you.

The only reason that I'm going to save you and to be your God is because I am like this. This is my character. I'm slow to anger and I'm abounding in love. Whenever we search for redeemable qualities within ourselves, we are never going to find it.

[12 : 51] The only grounds we have to appeal to God to save us is God himself and his character. Even though we're sinners and we're sinful people, the only reason that God continues to provide for us is because he is slow to anger and abounding in love.

And Jonah, as someone who is a covenant, you know, he's a prophet of God. He's supposed to represent God. He's supposed to live under these set of rules and be, sort of act like God.

Here, he doesn't seem to be very gracious. And we've seen this sort of pattern from Jonah before. In chapter one, the first thing Jonah says is, I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord.

If you think back to chapter one, Jonah's on the boat and he's actually the only person who's not fearing the Lord. Jonah's sort of, he's saying one thing, but his actions aren't really matching up to what he's saying.

And I think there's a good point of application for us here because I think as Christians, we can tend to be a little bit like that sometimes.

[14 : 10] We profess to the world that we believe in a God of love who created the world out of love and who's displayed, you know, the greatest act of love ever known in providing his son.

And as image bearers, people are supposed to, you know, reflect God and be like him. Yeah, we're supposed to think and act accordingly.

But in a world that's been stained by sin, I think we all have a tendency to think and act like Jonah. And yeah, we ourselves have been forgiven and have been sort of the object of God's love and grace.

And yet we don't really want to show that to other people. So this can be sort of trivial. It can be someone in church who you think is just a bit annoying and you just want to ignore.

Or it can be something a little bit more serious. And, you know, there may be stories that we have of people who have really wronged us and caused us a lot of pain and hurt.

[15 : 21] But I think as Christians, I think we should pray about these situations and ask God to help us use these situations to help us love Christ more.

To help us sort of show the love that God has shown to us and show it to other people. So Jonah finishes his prayer with a death wish.

Lord, take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live. His anger is just so out of control that he wants to die.

I think a lot of people have sort of tended to think that Jonah is so angry because Jonah is just a racist. He doesn't, he's a Hebrew and none of other Gentiles.

He probably lived at a time where there was a sort of heightened sense of animosity shown towards people of different cultures. People who maybe look different or sound different to him.

[16 : 37] And there might be an element of truth to that. But I think we need to be more sensitive to where Jonah is located in the biblical timeline.

Because Jonah is name dropped one other time in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings 14. Where we learn in verses 23 to 29 that Jonah is the prophet of Israel.

During a sort of successive reign of really bad kings. One of them, Jeroboam II. Who I think was kind of similar to like a Genghis Khan or Julius Caesar type figure.

You know, this great leader who's winning all these wars. Israel's sort of on the upward trajectory in terms of their sort of influence as a nation.

But Jeroboam in his personal life, he's maybe not making the greatest lifestyle choices. We read in 2 Kings 14 chapter 24 that he did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[17 : 51] If God is calling you out for being evil, then you've done something very wrong. And yeah, that's not good.

What tends to happen in sort of Israelite history is if the king is rubbish, if his spiritual discipline is not great, then that is going to have trickle down effects to the rest of the nation.

The nation is going to fall into sin and idolatry and apostasy. And Jonah is going to be aware of this.

He's going to know what is happening to his nation. He's going to be discerning as a prophet of God. And Jonah is also going to know what the consequences of this are.

In the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 28, we get a list of curses. Things that will happen if Israel as a nation or Israel's kings are unfaithful.

[18 : 56] If the nation turns to idols, then God's blessing is going to be taken away from them. The result is going to be exile and foreign nations are going to come in and defeat them.

An example of this is Deuteronomy 28 verse 36. This is not great if this happens.

But I think this context is sort of maybe a bit better for understanding Jonah's actions. Why he doesn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place.

And why he's so angry that Nineveh has repented. Because if Israel, during a time of great sin and apostasy. You know, if Jonah's called to go to Nineveh during this time.

And God blesses Nineveh. And the whole city repents. Then that is only going to mean one thing. It's going to mean judgment for Israel. And yeah, I don't think Jonah wants that.

[20 : 22] The Lord responds to Jonah's prayer with a question. Is it right for you to be angry?

If God asks you a question, you've probably done something wrong. God has perfect knowledge of everything. He knows the depths of our hearts. He knows all the hairs on our head.

So if he asks you a question, he probably already knows the answer. We see this in Genesis with, you know, Adam and Eve sinning.

And Cain killing his brother Abel. The first thing God does is confront them with a question. And Jonah, in his angry state, in his state of dejection, decides to get up and to leave the city.

He sort of shrugs off his question. He builds for himself a shelter. And he watches out, looks over the city and watches what's going to happen to them.

[21 : 27] So I think he's sort of, he's still kind of hoping that God might judge these wicked people. Sort of, I think he's hoping for a Sodom and Gomorrah, sort of, part two.

So, whereas God's first question to Jonah is verbal, his, and that doesn't work, his next response is to sort of use real life, use a real life sort of parable, kind of almost, a symbolic story.

I think the aim of God here is to try and get Jonah to understand that his anger is just completely unjustifiable.

And so God provides Jonah a plant. And this eases his discomfort. And for the first time in the whole story, we realize that Jonah is happy.

It's amazing that, you know, Jonah's had multiple opportunities throughout the story to be happy. God has saved him from the point of death, which was a mess entirely of his own making.

[22 : 45] God has, you know, caused the greatest nation in the world at the time to repent. But it's only when Jonah is saved from his own discomfort that he shows joy.

And not just any joy. It's the same sort of emphasis as used. Jonah is very happy about the plant. His joy is short-lived, however.

God provides a worm, which eats up the plant. And then a strong east wind comes in. And Jonah is back to wanting to die.

God asks him the same question. Yeah. Jonah says, it's better for me to die than to live.

He's, you know, going up and down. Sort of bipolar, almost. And God finally responds.

[23 : 51] God asks Jonah another question. Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said. And I'm so angry, I wish I were dead. And God finally responds.

And this is how the whole story ends. You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend to it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

I think the point that God is trying to make to Jonah is, you're happy about this plant.

And yet, this plant was sort of like a gift to you. You didn't do anything to contribute to it. And it's sort of come up and it's gone overnight.

[24 : 50] It's not exactly been in his life very long. He can't claim any sort of emotional attachment to the plant. It kind of meant that much to him. And I think God responds, if you're so happy about this plant, then shouldn't it also be right for me to show concern for a human being who's made in my image?

And not just one human being, but a whole city of human beings. Jonah's sort of love for the plant is motivated by his self-interest, what it does to him.

It's not, you know, there's no genuine love for the plant. I think this phrase, people who don't know their left hand from their right, I don't think it means that the Ninevites are sort of like children who just don't know anything.

But I think it's to suggest that there may be sort of, they need guidance. They're sort of waywards. I think it's a general phrase to describe the human condition.

Sort of the way the Bible describes people as sheep or Jesus, lost sheep who have gone astray. Every human being seems to have an innate tendency to wander and to get lost, not really knowing what they're doing.

[26 : 28] You know, they may have some idea of there's an intended goal or there's a general idea of what's good, but they seem to never be able to reach it. If you know your Westminster Shorter Catechism, you should know that you should do all things for God's glory.

That is your chief end. That's your goal. And yet, all of us at some point in our lives have chosen to live our lives for our own glory. Along the way, we sort of, yeah, we stray away from our true purpose and from our true shepherd and our true aim.

Some of us may get more lost than others, and some of us may not even realize that we are lost. But I think that in itself is a sign of being lost.

Sort of similar to Isaiah 53, all like sheep have gone astray. And I think it's similar to what Paul is getting at in Romans 3, where he basically says, the reason why you're in this state and the reason why the world is like this and we feel like this is because we're all living under the power of sin.

And it's nothing sort of inside of you that is going to solve this problem. It's something that has to come from outside of you. And that's how the book of Jonah ends.

[28 : 03] The book ends with this rebuke from God, basically saying, if Jonah, if you care about yourself and this plant more than this Gentile city, even though I've been gracious and faithful to you and to your nation throughout your life, and the Ninevites are completely ignorant of the promises that I've made, shouldn't it also be right for me to show care to them?

So that's the book of Jonah. What are we to make of it? What is actually the point of Jonah? What does it mean for us?

Well, I think Jonah is located in the minor prophets in the Old Testament. And I think generally with the prophetic books in the Bible, they're usually trying to do sort of two things.

They're announcing the end of God's covenant with Israel, God's old covenant. You know, Israel as a nation, the sacrificial system. These things have sort of served their purpose.

But at the same time, it's sort of foreseeing a new covenant, one that is going to be better than the old covenant. And I think that's the case with the book of Jonah as well.

[29 : 32] Have you ever wondered why Jonah is a book that's located within the minor prophets, and yet it's a book which doesn't actually contain any prophecies?

Or at least Jonah doesn't seem to be doing much prophesying. I think it's because the whole story itself has generally or historically been intended to be viewed as a prophecy.

Jonah is not a symbol of what happens when we run away from our responsibilities in life. I think Jonah is more intended to be a symbol of the nation of Israel as a whole.

He represents himself, but I think in the Bible it's sort of common to have one person representing a group of people. So in chapter 1, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah.

Israel was sort of the nation that was seen as having the oracles of God. And notice the direction that Jonah is heading in chapter 1.

[30 : 45] First, he heads down to Joppa. He's given a mission, and he heads down. He runs away, heads down to Joppa. He gets on the boat where he heads down below deck.

And then on the boat he's thrown, and now he's sinking down into the sea. I think the author is trying to show us that, you know, Jonah in his sin and rebellion, but also representing the nation of Israel and their sin and rebellion, is sinking further and further down, sort of like being flushed down the toilet.

God is finished with them. Or maybe not finished, but they've served their purpose. But at the same time, I think we also see the providential hand of God in the story.

And we're getting the sense that something bigger is going to happen. First, Jonah is called to preach to Nineveh, a great city. And then God sends a great storm.

It's not just a random storm that, you know, comes in out of nowhere, but God appoints, sends a storm. And then God sends a great fish.

[32 : 08] Again, it's not just a random fish. God appointed a fish to swallow Jonah. And then, again, he preaches to a great city. I think there's sort of a general anticipation that, though Israel is sort of drowning, there's something bigger that's going to come.

And I think, within the story, something big does come. The whole nation of, the whole city of Nineveh has repented. But I think that's only just a faint analogy or a faint picture of, well, something really big that's coming.

Jonah, in his sermon to the Ninevites, it's kind of a strange sermon. It's not very long. Chapter 3, verse 4. Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

There isn't much of a mention of a gracious or a compassionate God. And I don't think there's much of a gospel message in here.

It's sort of like Jonah's concealing the message, which I think is very telling. Jonah doesn't want the Ninevites to be saved, so I'm going to tell them as little as possible.

[33 : 34] Yeah. One day in Israel, there would arise a prophet who would fully reveal that message and would sort of fully display God's plan of redemption for humanity and present the gospel.

And this prophet would put Jonah to shame. Instead of running away from a sinful city, this prophet would come down, condescend to a sinful city, and save them.

Instead of looking out onto a sinful city with fire in his eyes, hoping for their destruction, Jesus would look out onto Jerusalem with tears in his eyes, praying for their salvation.

And instead of being thrown overboard and sacrificing himself because of his own sin, Jesus would sacrifice himself because of the sin of others, of sinners who put their trust in him.

And Jesus wouldn't be vomited at his tomb, but he would rise from it in glory and ascend into heaven, given authority and power of all things in heaven and on earth.

[35 : 08] I think Jonah's mission to Nineveh was in anticipation of Christ's mission, which was to fulfill all of the old covenant and to make a new covenant, which would be available for everyone, for Jews and for Gentiles.

So, by way of application, how does this story speak to us today? I think the unanswered question at the end is a question for all of us.

Jonah's problem was that he was so soaked in his own self-care and love of himself and his own nation and his own people that it sort of was a detriment to God's plan to save a sinful people, which maybe it's relatable to some of you.

I know it's relatable for me how many times I prioritize my own time and yeah, spending time with people who I want to spend time with instead of time I could spend in church or time I could spend with my non-Christian friends, people who are living in sin and who don't really know what they're doing, who need a savior and not knowing that one has been provided for them.

Or maybe you're here tonight and you can resonate with that feeling of being lost. or maybe you think you're not lost at all and you're perfectly fine without the gospel.

[36 : 57] But I think Jonah is a good case study in that scenario because throughout the whole story Jonah is convinced that the Ninevites are the most evil and wicked people on earth and yet by the end of the story it's sort of Jonah who's seen as the person who should be most undeserving of God's love and compassion.

The Ninevites repented from their sin but Jonah seems to have no repentance at all. I think we all have the tendency to be like Jonah.

We think we're better than other people and we think we know what we're doing when we really don't. We sort of live in this constant state of deluding ourselves.

We refuse to accept that we are misguided but deep down we know that there's something wrong with us. We're always on a search for that one thing waiting for a time in our lives when we're will be truly fulfilled and yet it never comes.

for some people it can take a long time to realize that there is something wrong with us and by that time we may think that you know we've gone too far and we're sort of like Jonah in you know in the chaotic waters not really knowing what's happening.

[38 : 32] if you can resonate with that feeling maybe you're a Christian and you've made mistakes living in sin or maybe you're here and you've just made a complete train wreck of your life and you've just like arrived at church hoping that you'll find a solution hoping that one will be provided and although I'm young I know what that feels like well Jesus once told a story that was very similar to the story of Jonah it was a story of the son of a wealthy man who squandered all the gifts and all the money that his father had given him living a life of sin and of selfishness of greed adultery and by the time he realized the mess that he was in which was a mess entirely of his own making he was in a wretched state but he had a father who loved him he loved him before the son left and he loved him even more when the son returned

I think one of Jesus' points in telling the story of the prodigal son is that regardless of the amount of times that we've deserted God and regardless of the unbearable weight of shame and guilt that we feel when we've done things wrong that we have a father who will never desert us who will never desert us regardless of the amount of times that we desert him he's always there to welcome us back and I think one of the most amazing parts of the story of the prodigal son is that the father runs to the son he accepts us he consoles us he wipes the tears from our eyes he doesn't leave us in a state of sort of misery or self hate but he puts on his finest robes which now because of

Christ and what he's done on the cross he forgets he forgets our sin he forgets all the mistakes and all the wrongs that we have done and instead when he looks at you he sees the righteousness of Christ and by his mercy he transforms us and he gives us new hearts with new desires we no longer want to live for ourselves but we want to live for God and for his kingdom we sort of look at the love that has been displayed for us on the cross and we then in turn want to show that love to other people yeah and this sort of transformation is available for all who sort of look to Christ who look to the cross and say to themselves that that was done for me again so