

Sermon 5th July 2020

This is a rather old and strangely enticing advertisement from 1914. In this advert, Ernest Shackleton asks for assistance on his expedition to the Antarctic. He warned that the journey would be hazardous for minimal pay-out, and that a safe return home was "doubtful".

We are going to spend the next four weeks going through the book of Jonah and seeing what God has to teach us from His interactions with Jonah. For this morning we are going to take a bird's eye view of the complete book, its setting, the main character and some of the key incidents and themes.

So, let start with the eponymous hero Jonah. Jonah was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel around 800-750 BC and contemporary of Amos. The role of Prophet was to speak God's words to those people God had called them to minister too. Often this proclamation involved pointing out their sin and calling them back to right living or right relationship with God. It also entailed explaining what Gods judgement/punishment was to be. This forthtelling of God's punishment was not always well received. On the whole the role of Prophet was not one people sought and tended to have significant detrimental effects on the Prophets life. An advert for the job of Prophet would probably read much like Ernest Shackleton's. Jonah lived during a momentous period when the northern Kingdom of Israel was taking back land lost to the Syrians years before. King Jeroboam was able to continue this process during Jonah's time and beyond. Jonah himself had prophesised that God would cause this to happen (2 Kings 14:25).

In chapter 1 God sends Jonah on a mission to Nineveh, **Jonah 1:1** *"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."* What was he to preach? Jonah 3:4 *"Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."* Jonah was to preach a warning that Nineveh was to be destroyed because of its wickedness. Now you might think that Jonah would have enjoyed taking this warning and promise of destruction to a vile pagan city. A city that was the capital of a nation God and had said he would one day use to punish Israel.

You may well have expected Jonah be very happy with the bad news for Nineveh. But Jonah runs to Tarshish, the opposite direction from Nineveh. At this stage, no reason is given for why Jonah would have “run away from God”.

In chapter 2, God puts Jonah in the belly of a fish for three days before having the fish spit him back on shore. At the end of this chapter, at the very centre of the book of Jonah lies the heart of God and the message of Jonah “*Salvation comes from the Lord.*”

In chapter 3, God once again commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys God’s command, as we will see grudgingly, and finally delivers the message to Nineveh. Amazingly, the Ninevites repent, and God relents.

In chapter 4, Jonah get really angry with God and sulks. God has the last word when He asks Jonah why he should not be concerned about the people of Nineveh.

Some of the key ideas:

1. Jonah confronts all of us with God’s sovereign will.

God says go. Jonah says no. While Jonah’s message and mission were unique, the ebb and flow of his wrestling’s with the clearly revealed will of God is common to all of humanity. One of the striking contrasts in this book is between how Jonah responds to God’s Word, and the way that the Ninevite pagans respond. Jonah runs, but Nineveh repents. Furthermore, we can all relate to the Ninevites when God’s Word reverberates in our souls and challenges our sins or wrong desires. What do you do with that challenge from God? Do you grab your track shoes and run? If so, which way are you running, from God or towards God?

2. Jonah shows us there is nowhere to retreat from the gaze of God.

In Psalm 139:7, David asks God: “Where shall I flee from your presence?” Jonah answers David’s question in a vivid fashion. God speaks. Jonah runs. God’s not impressed by Jonah’s somewhat feeble attempt to flee from Him. God awakens him from his victory nap only to carry him to utter depths of the sea.

There in the belly of the fish, Jonah discovers that no matter how determined his efforts he failed to run away from God. God carried him to the depths so he’d learn not only

that he can't escape the presence of God, but also that God might raise Jonah's gaze back up to the God whose gaze never left him.

3. Jonah displays the heart of God behind the will of God.

This book reveals just as much about God's "heart" as it does "God's will. God's Word of judgment against sin pulsates with God's heart to save sinners.

Consider how different this is from Jonah himself. God seeks the good of his enemies even while his human prophet's heart proves quite the opposite. Jonah stands as a stark mirror image of Isaiah, the prophet who tells God "Here am I; send me" and God responds by telling him no one will listen. Here, God sends his evangelist to those who seem furthest from God. Jonah preaches, reluctantly. The Ninevites repent. God relents. But how does Jonah respond? You'd think this missionary prophet would rejoice. Not so, Jonah 4:1 tells us the opposite: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." Why? Jonah 4:2 unpacks this adding an important flashback detail intentionally left absent from the beginning of the book: "That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Jonah didn't run because he feared the Ninevites killing him; he feared God saving them.

Jonah didn't run due to his fear of Ninevites, but his hatred of them. They were cruel. They were wicked. Jonah saw them as less than human, less valuable than the plant that brought him shade.

In short, Jonah was a racist. He didn't view others with the heart of the God of Abraham who promised that he would bless all nations through him in Genesis 12. The Ninevites' violence didn't send Jonah running. God's mercy toward Jonah's hated enemies sent Jonah running. Jonah anticipated God's mercy, and he hated it. The book of Jonah asks us if our hearts beat with God in such a way that we gladly anticipate God saving people quite different from us, even our enemies, that he might glorify Himself with an open display of his mercy.

4. Jonah points to Jesus.

First, both Jonah and Jesus gave their lives to save sinners.

The eternal Son of God never flinched at coming to rescue rebels and enemies and bring them to God at the cost of His very life. One can hardly miss the foreshadowing of Christ in the sailors chunking Jonah into the sea to silence the storm that threatened to sink their boat. Jonah argued that his substitutionary death would save their lives from the storm. Of course, the irony of ironies is that Jonah's running from God's will to save those sinful Ninevites actually led to the salvation of even more Gentiles—the sailors he hoped would help him escape God.

Second, Jesus submitted his will to God's, while Jonah valued his will over God's.

Jonah's death appears almost suicidal, and nothing leads us to think that his death wish pictures a surrendering to the will of God to preach to the Ninevites. In fact, his depression in response to the Ninevites' repentance and salvation confirms that while Jonah's heart toward God may have changed in Jonah 3, he didn't fully embrace God's will from his heart. Jonah grudgingly went to Nineveh in the hope that the people wouldn't repent, and God would indeed overthrow the city.

Compare this to Jesus attitude in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked if this cup might be removed from his lips even as he proclaimed, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus made an informed decision, knowing what horror lay before Him, he chose willing to go to the cross for you and I. Jesus went to the cross to see sinners saved, Jonah went to Nineveh to see sinners burn.

Theme

It is easy to read the Biblical accounts of Joshua or Jonah and conclude they are ripping yarns about the eponymous heroes. You can become very short sighted and concentrate on the characters in the story and miss the whole point of the account. The Bible is first and foremost an account of God and His dealings with humanity. God is always the principal character or leading man, yes even in the book of Esther where he isn't mentioned. When we read Jonah, we need to understand that it is an account of God's love and desire for those who are His enemies, to repent and turn to Him. Both Joshua and Jonah begin with God giving commands, he is the instigator, the author of all that follows.

The book of Jonah should challenge us in the same way that God challenged Jonah. It should challenge us to look beyond our own prejudices, likes and dislikes. Jonah couldn't accept that God wanted to show mercy on the Ninevites. Do you have Ninevites in your life? Is there a person or group of people that are in your mind beyond God's grace and mercy? If there are Ninevites in your life you haven't really understood God's will or heart.

God's will and heart is expressed in the most well know piece of scripture John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

The word translated world can be just as accurately translated all the people of the world. The minute you think that some person or group of people are beyond God love and desire to restore to relationship with Him you have ceased to understand God's will and heart and started on the long journey to Tarshish.

"Not called!" did you say?

'Not heard the call,' I think you should say.

Put your ear down to the Bible and hear Him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help. Go stand by the gates of hell and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers and sisters and servants and masters not to come there. Then look Christ in the face — whose mercy you have professed to obey — and tell Him whether you will join heart and soul and body and circumstances in the march to publish His mercy to the world."

— William Booth