

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

Jonah

Introduction:

This morning we are going to be looking at another one of those "Minor Prophets." The book we are studying today is the book of Jonah. It is only slightly longer than the prophecy of Obadiah, which we looked at last week. Jonah is arguably the best known of all of the OT prophets, even though most people don't think of him as a prophet, but rather as the character in a fascinating story.

One of the traditional stories that every child who has ever gone to Sunday School knows is the story of Jonah and the whale (there are some fallacies even in that title, but we will get to that later).

Jonah lived during the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel. He is mentioned in only one other place in the OT. It is found in 2 Kings 14:25, in the account of the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel:

"He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amitai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher."

Jonah apparently prophesied in the days of Jeroboam and brought him word from the Lord regarding the expansion of the kingdom. So we know when Jonah lived. We also know where he came from. Gath-hepher was on the border of the land allotted to the tribe of Zebulun. It was not far from the town of Nazareth in Galilee. Don't confuse it with Gath, one of the cities of the Philistines.

The book of Jonah is somewhat unique among the OT prophets. It is not so much a prophetic message to a nation as what we would call a prophetic narrative – a story. In fact, when you read the opening words of this book it sounds very much like some of the accounts of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah..." The ESV Study Bible says, "In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic

words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives."

On that note, there are those who suggest that the account of Jonah is not to be taken as literal, but is an allegory or a parable. They would say that this book is a story told to teach a lesson, but it is not an actual historical event. Yet there are many specifics given in the story that would indicate that it is a historical event. In the NT Jesus treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events.

"For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." (Matthew 12:40-41 ESV)

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly didactic; that is, the story is told to teach the reader key lessons. I hope that we will see some of those lessons this morning.

The book has been divided into 4 chapters in our Bibles. Obviously the chapters are not part of the inspired text, but they give us a good division of the book. Chuck Swindoll outlines the book this way:

1. Running from God – ch. 1
2. Running to God – ch. 2
3. Running with God – ch. 3
4. Running against God – ch. 4

John MacArthur uses a similar outline:

1. Running from God's Will
2. Submitting to God's Will
3. Fulfilling God's Will
4. Questioning God's Will

As I mentioned earlier, Jonah lived during the time of Jeroboam II of Israel. That places his ministry somewhere between 780 BC and 750 BC. We do not know who actually wrote the book or when it was written.

Well, let's have a quick look at this little book...

I. Running from God's Will

Read vv. 1-2... So where and what was this city, Nineveh. It was a major city, perhaps the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. As we know, the Assyrians were a ruthless nation, brutal, barbarian people with no regard for God or human life. Nineveh was located about 500 miles (800 km) northeast of Israel. So this was no small journey for Jonah to make.

MacArthur points out that while other prophets prophesied against Gentile nations, this is the only case of a prophet actually being sent to a foreign nation to deliver God's message against them. This was for the salvation of that city and for the shame and jealousy of Israel, as well as a rebuke to the reluctance of the Jews to bring Gentiles to the true God.

Look at v. 3 – (*read it and talk about Jonah's response*)

V. 4 – the result of Jonah's defection – note God's intervention. Throughout this narrative we continually see the Lord interacting with Jonah and with nature. "The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea..." This was not a coincidence or casual circumstance. It was God intervening to get Jonah's attention.

Discuss the resulting events, culminating in Jonah being thrown into the sea and the storm ceasing its raging – see v. 15. In v. 16 we see the positive response of the sailors to God's intervention.

Now look at v. 17 – read it... "...the Lord appointed a great fish..." First of all this is never called a whale. We do not know what kind of fish it was. Actually, I believe it was a creature especially designed for this event. It may not be anything which normally lives in the sea.

But I would also like to draw your attention to the Lord's interaction here. The Lord "appointed" (ESV) (NIV – provided; NKJV – prepared). All of those terms together give us a good idea of the meaning of the word. It means to prepare or ordain, to appoint. The same word is used three times in ch. 4 as well. The Lord appointed (prepared, provided) a plant... a worm... a scorching east wind. The indication in all of these occurrences is that each aspect of these events in Jonah's life were specifically appointed or prepared by God just for him.

So now Jonah is in the belly of the great fish. In ch. 2 we see him...

II. Submitting to God's Will

From the depth and the darkness of the belly of the fish, Jonah cried out to God in prayer. God certainly had his attention now. Note that the structure of this passage sounds like a narration of the prayer, as though Jonah was recounting the story later on. *Read the prayer – vv. 2-9.* It certainly seems that Jonah has learned his lesson. He seems to be repentant and realizes that he has failed God.

In verse 10, you have the next intervention of God. Even this fish listens to God's instruction. The fish spits Jonah out on the shore. We are not told where this took place, but I think it is safe to assume that it was back on the coast of Israel. It would also seem that Jonah was none the worse for having spent three days inside a fish.

Now we come to the third chapter where we see Jonah...

III. Fulfilling God's Will

God comes to Jonah a second time. Even though he failed miserably the first time, God gives him a second chance. He comes back with almost the same message again.

Read 3:1-2 – note the change in the last line of the message. Then look at v. 3 and the difference in Jonah's response.

Ch. 1	Ch. 3
But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish	So Jonah arose... went to Nineveh
From the presence of the Lord	According to the word of the Lord

What a difference in his response. Now he was ready to do what the Lord commanded.

Read v. 3b - the text emphasizes not only its size (cf. 1:2) but its importance (cf. 4:11). A metropolitan city the size of Nineveh, with a circumference of about 60 miles, would require three days just to get around it. These dimensions are confirmed by historians. Stopping to preach would only add to the time requirement.

v. 4 – Jonah's message – only 8 words in our English Bibles. NIV - "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." It would seem ap-

parent that there had to be more information—the fact that it was God's doing that the city would be destroyed. But the message was clear and concise. And the response was quick and decisive.

Go through vv. 5-9 – the response of the people of Nineveh from the least right up to the king.

v. 10 – we see God's reaction to the response of the people. He relented and did not destroy the city.

IV. Questioning God's Will

Chapter 4 is where things really start to get interesting. This is the part that tends to get neglected in the Sunday School story of Jonah.

Look at v. 1 – “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.” The reason for his anger – read v. 2 – he did not want the Ninevites, those wicked Assyrians to experience the mercy and the forgiveness of God. He didn’t want their salvation. He wanted their destruction. It seems that he must have declared that message from the Lord with great joy. “Just another 40 days, and you people are going to be destroyed.” How he must have gloated over the coming disaster. How dare God change his mind and show them mercy?

In vv. 3-9 we see Jonah’s pity party – boy, did he ever feel sorry for himself. *Read the verses and briefly recount the events of the plant, the worm and the scorching wind.*

In vv. 10-11 we see God declaring his love for the people of Nineveh and the pity he has for those who repent.

There is an amazing parallel to this in the NT. Jesus told a story one day of two sons (Luke 15). Jonah is very much like the older son, who became angry when his father showed mercy to his younger brother who had squandered his inheritance. (*Discuss the story briefly*)

Conclusion:

So again we must ask: what are the lessons in this for us? There are a number of things that come to mind.

1. It is impossible to escape from God. David knew this. Remember his words in Psalm 139. “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or

where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalms 139:7-8 ESV) Jeremiah knew it. He wrote these words: ““Am I a God at hand,” declares the LORD, “and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:23-24 ESV) Jonah learned the hard way that you cannot escape from God. So let’s not try.

2. God is a God of second chances. Jonah failed miserably by trying to run away from God. We might have written him off and said, I will get someone else to do the job. Remember John Mark in the NT. Paul wanted to write him off, but Barnabas knew the compassion of God and gave him a second chance. God gave Jonah a second chance. You may feel that you have failed God, but remember, God is willing to forgive and restore you to service again.
3. God’s love and mercy, his compassion and forgiveness is extended to people of all nations and races and classes of people. It matters not the color of skin, or the ancestry of a person, God is reaching out to them. It doesn’t even matter how wicked or evil a person has been, or a people has been, God’s desire is for them to repent and he will forgive. Sometimes we may be like Jonah—we want to see people suffer, to be punished for their sin. We don’t want mercy, we want punishment. But God is not like that.
4. God uses cracked pots. I think that is the name of a book. But it is true. Jonah was not at all like we think of a prophet. His attitudes and actions were self-centered and filled with hatred and prejudice. Yet God called him and used him to take his message to a very wicked people so they could hear and repent.

I don’t know what God is saying to you this morning, but I believe that there is something in this story of Jonah for every one of us. Do not ignore what God has speaking to your heart and mind today.