

Jonah's course correction

Jonah

Course correction

Jonah went on a great journey, as you no doubt know well. It's a very well known narrative. Most old Sunday school scholars would be able to recount it. Such things as what happened to him when he went to sea, and the city he subsequently traveled to. However, I want to pose a few puzzling questions, the answers to which maybe aren't universally known.

You see, the book is very famous, but there are aspects of it that are less understood, maybe even ignored, but they are vital to understand. The first puzzling issue: Jonah is mentioned by Jesus Christ when He was speaking to the Pharisees who wanted Him to perform a miracle for them, but He refused, saying the only sign He would give them was the sign of Jonah. Why did He say that? What is this sign, or lesson of Jonah? Why was this relevant to the Pharisees?

MATTHEW 12:38-39

THEN CERTAIN OF THE SCRIBES AND OF THE PHARISEES ANSWERED, SAYING, MASTER, WE WOULD SEE A SIGN FROM THEE.

BUT HE ANSWERED AND SAID UNTO THEM, AN EVIL AND ADULTEROUS GENERATION SEEKETH AFTER A SIGN; AND THERE SHALL NO SIGN BE GIVEN TO IT, BUT THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAS:(JONAH)

Secondly, let me take you to the end of Jonah, to the last chapter, chapter 4. This isn't so well known, and is a neglected part of the book. At this point Jonah has been sent to the city of Nineveh. He's preached to them, and the people have listened and repented of their

wickedness. You would have thought Jonah would have been pleased, but he is far from that.

JONAH 4.1,3

BUT IT DISPLEASED JONAH EXCEEDINGLY,
AND HE WAS VERY ANGRY...

(HE SAID) O LORD, TAKE, I BESEECH THEE,
MY LIFE FROM ME; FOR IT IS BETTER FOR
ME TO DIE THAN TO LIVE.

The Bible couldn't be clearer, we're supposed to notice that Jonah is very unhappy, so much so, he wants to die! The question is, why?!

Now, I've heard a few surprising answers to that over the years. But I believe the answer is quite clear if we understand that the book of Jonah isn't the first place we encounter Jonah in the Bible. He's already cropped up in 2 Kings.

2 KINGS 14.25

HE RESTORED THE COAST OF ISRAEL FROM THE
ENTERING OF HAMATH UNTO THE SEA OF THE
PLAIN, ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF THE
LORD GOD OF ISRAEL, WHICH HE SPAKE BY
THE HAND OF HIS SERVANT JONAH, THE SON
OF AMITTAI, THE PROPHET,

He was the prophet of Israel at the time of King Jeroboam. He'd been used to help them. And like any prophet, he was keenly aware of the Messianic promises, and was anxiously looking for their fulfillment. The nation of Israel was where his heart was, he'd devoted his life to his people. Their enemies were his enemies. The Gentile nation of Assyria was certainly shaping up to be their enemy. In fact it would be the Assyrians who would eventually

overthrow Israel. So when God sends Jonah to Nineveh the capital of Assyria, it is not surprising Jonah is unhappy about it. Jonah had no 'heart' for them, he wasn't interested in their salvation.

I don't know if you know anything about the Assyrians? They were cruel, vicious and bloodthirsty. Inflicting terrible torture on their enemies. I won't go into details, so as not to give you nightmares, let's just say they were very wicked. Can you see why Jonah didn't want to go? Not just because of fear (which is understandable), but because he had a little problem. A problem God needed to correct in him. You see, Jonah harbored a little bit of nationalistic self righteousness. He knew Israel was bad. He knew they needed salvation. But he also knew that a salvation would need to come by the promised Messiah. That's what he was looking for. For the Jewish nation to bring the Saviour forth. His heart was for his people. However, the heart of God is for all nations to be blessed, all people need salvation. Crucially, none of them deserve it though. It's clear Jonah believed some deserved it less than others!



Before we are quick to condemn Jonah in this, we should realize that we too can be tempted to think some people are worse than others (which is true) and therefore deserve salvation less (which is false- no one deserves salvation). To Jonah, the Assyrians were Godless gentiles, but the Jews, although rebellious, were God's people. The truth was that they had been chosen not because of any intrinsic virtue in themselves, in fact it was quite the opposite. The Bible says they were a stubborn and a hard-hearted people. They were only a 'typical' church used to bring forth the scriptures and the Messianic line. They were no more special, or deserving of salvation than any other nation. The same is true of someone born into a Christian family.

However, one may be tempted to think those who go to church, or who have grown up in a Christian home, deserve to be saved more than others who may be more badly behaved. The truth is that they are only more responsible for not coming to God, because they know more, having been privileged in their upbringing. A modern day 'Jonah' may be tempted to think about only speaking to the 'better' people, more likely to accept. I think this was Jonah's problem, and this is what needed correcting. It was a bit like when Peter needed to be corrected of the same thing by Paul (Gal 2.11-21).

The Assyrians were bad, some of the worst people in history, but God was going to use them as an example. Jonah didn't want to go. This disobedience took him 'down'. So he went *down* to Joppa. Boarded a ship to Tarshish, and went *down* to the bottom of the ship. Then eventually this took him *down* to the depths of the sea, in a hellish situation - having been swallowed by a great fish. This event would be used as a picture by Jesus Christ for the very way sinful men and women are to find salvation.



MATTHEW 12:40
 FOR AS JONAS WAS THREE DAYS AND
 THREE NIGHTS IN THE WHALE'S (*COULD
 BE TRANSLATED 'HUGE FISH'*) BELLY; SO SHALL
 THE SON OF MAN BE THREE DAYS
 AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE HEART
 OF THE EARTH.

The parallels are fairly obvious. There's a storm - like the storms of life, the troubles and warnings of judgment against sin. The lives of all the men aboard are in danger - like all men in danger of ultimate judgment and hell. Jonah takes the rightful blame, and tells them to throw him overboard, to give his life to save theirs. In doing this the sailors are saved.



The men pray and offer sacrifice to the One true God who is the only One who can save; - This is like Christ taking our sin and punishment on the cross, in order to save us from our sins. By trusting in Christ's words and work we can be saved,- like those sailors trusted Jonah's words and action. Jonah is thrown overboard and is swallowed by a great fish.



In that hellish place he prays and in three days he is delivered, 'resurrected' we could say, for it was a miraculous escape; - Christ suffers the pangs of hell on the cross and goes down to the tomb, but in three days is resurrected back to life.



Did Jonah understand the significance of this event? It's possible he had some understanding of it when he came to write all this down. Regardless, the Holy Spirit uses it as a grand picture of Christ's death and resurrection. As for Jonah, he still has more lessons to learn. He has been corrected enough to go to Nineveh, and be obedient in preaching to them. However, the Lord had not finished His refining work.

So Jonah preaches to them. I suspect he majored upon God's justice and righteous anger at sin, saying that they were wicked, that they didn't know the true God, and that God would judge them in forty days. Maybe he even thought, in the back of his mind, "And you'll get what you deserve!" Had he forgotten that he didn't deserve salvation either? Maybe a touch of nationalistic self-righteousness had crept into him, like it clearly did with the proud Pharisees. Pride is a terrible danger, even for Christians. But the Holy Spirit was working in the hearts of those in Nineveh. He was convicting them and they realized that there may be mercy with the One true God. Their king represents their collective attitude.

"Let every man...turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" Jon 3.8,9

JONAH 3. 8,9

“LET MAN AND BEAST BE COVERED WITH
SACKCLOTH, AND CRY MIGHTILY UNTO GOD: YEA,
LET THEM TURN EVERY ONE FROM HIS EVIL WAY,
AND FROM THE VIOLENCE THAT IS IN THEIR HANDS.

WHO CAN TELL IF GOD WILL TURN AND REPENT,
AND TURN AWAY FROM HIS FIERCE ANGER, THAT WE
PERISH NOT?”

This is how any man can come to God in repentance and faith, trusting in the King of the Jews. The Ninevites responded with the true repentance of the people "they believed God", shown in the words of their king. This is how we should come to God. They humbled themselves - the king put off his proud robes and put on sackcloth, to show what was happening in his heart. This is like putting off the robes of self-righteousness, and being clothed with Christ's righteousness instead. The king bid all of them to sincerely pray, and after their prayer, they waited and hoped for God's free mercy, for they knew they didn't deserve it. This is how we should think, act and pray when we are brought to see our sins before a Holy and angry God.

God saw and heard them and turned from the judgment, and forgives them freely by grace. Of course He does, He'll do that for all who come to Him sincerely for a free undeserved salvation. Because it is merited by the work of Christ, in the case of the Assyrians, His future work that would be applied back to them.

Jonah doesn't quite see it so clearly though. He's a bit like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. He's angry. To paraphrase, he says "I knew it! I knew you're merciful and gracious. I knew you'd do that. You're being too lenient. What about justice? You're forgiving these people? What about the people of the promise? Your special people? My people, Israel!?"

Jon 4.2 "I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil."

What he is really saying is that the Ninevites don't deserve it. He uses the word "gracious", but he needs reminding what that word really means- undeserved favour. He seems to say, "I know my people are bad, but not as bad as the Assyrians. Don't be too lenient! I've spent my life trying to reach and save my people, to preserve them so the Messiah might come. But now you send me to our enemies instead, and you save this Godless nation. I've had enough, I want to die!"

We must resist being too hard on Jonah, he has been through a lot. He is a prophet of God. His heart is for the promise of salvation. He has done a mighty work for God, and been used by Him to save an entire city. Thus we see how gently God deals with his erring, over nationalistic, prophet. He asks "Doest thou well to be angry?"

JONAH 4. 4

THEN SAID THE LORD, DOEST THOU
WELL TO BE ANGRY?

Jonah replies that he does. So God gives him a practical, visual lesson, to show him his error. You see, Jonah separated himself from these gentiles, and sat on the east side of the

city, to see what would become of Nineveh. He worked to build a shelter for himself from the weather. He was evidently not a very good shelter builder, for it didn't adequately do the job. This was a bit like Adam attempting to cover himself with fig leaves. So God does the sheltering for him. He freely sends a plant to grow quickly and shelter Jonah. This was something Jonah hadn't worked at, and therefore didn't strictly deserve, but God graciously gave it to him.

Then God takes it away. He sends a worm (Note how God controls every detail of life in His providence. There is no such thing as luck or chance.) Then God sends a vehement east wind and the sun to beat down upon Jonah's head. Jonah is so angry by now, he thinks it's better to die than to live. Maybe he thought "My whole life's work and desire for Israel has come to nothing. How can the Saviour come? Instead I have to watch another nation receive what belongs to them!"

So God has to teach him with the powerful words in the last two verses. Words Jonah would, no doubt, never forget. Jon 4.10,11 *"Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"*

In this God is saying; Jonah, you've had pity on a plant, which you didn't deserve because you didn't do any work to make it grow. I had to freely give it to you. Don't you see, you don't deserve salvation either, just as much as the Assyrians don't deserve it? No one is righteous, no not one. You've felt more sorrow and compassion for a plant dying than for 120000 children and many animals. A person is of much more value than a plant, even an animal is worth more! God says, in effect, shouldn't I have compassion on people more than plants? Salvation is by free grace, not by your race!

This answers our question about why Jesus Christ says to the proud Pharisees, they should learn the lesson of Jonah. Jonah had thought the Jewish nation was a little bit special, a bit more deserving. The Pharisees certainly did, even Peter fell into that trap. Some Christians can make the same mistake also regarding the Jews. Or even just thinking that people who are brought up in church, or go to Sunday school, deserve salvation and forgiveness just a little bit more than others.



GRACE

No one deserves salvation, the Bible makes this clear. The only thing we all deserve is the righteous anger of God in wrath. No one deserves to even hear the gospel. I've often heard people say "But what about the people who have never had the chance to hear the Gospel message?" As if this is somehow a human right, and God is therefore unfair for condemning them. But a person is condemned justly for their sins, not based upon whether or not God has graciously chosen to bring the Gospel to their ears. God would still be perfectly just if no-one heard the good news of salvation by Christ, and all were judged for their sins.

Thankfully God sends out his people to preach, like He did Jonah to Nineveh. If you've heard this Gospel message, don't you see how blessed you are? Don't you see how you don't deserve salvation, anymore than the worst people you know? There are degrees of sin, and one man may be worse than another, but even one sin keeps us from heaven. So be like the people of Nineveh and repent sincerely. Otherwise they'll rise up in testimony on the last day against you saying "as bad as we were, we repented, but you did not. Even though you heard the message in church many times "

MATTHEW 12. 41
THE MEN OF NINEVEH SHALL RISE IN
JUDGMENT WITH THIS GENERATION, AND
SHALL CONDEMN IT: BECAUSE THEY
REPENTED AT THE PREACHING OF JONAH;
AND, BEHOLD, A GREATER THAN JONAH IS
HERE.

This sign of Jonah is a lesson about the sacrifice of Christ, and a lesson of free gracious salvation. Jonah went on a long journey on his feet, but he went on an even greater one in his heart. God had kindly corrected the course of His erring prophet, and saved multitudes in the process. The book of Jonah is thus recorded for us to learn these wonderful truths. May we do so.