

Route Sixty-Six

Part Thirty-Two

Jonah

A Greater than Jonah

(John 5:39; Matthew 12:41)

With Study Questions

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You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here (Matthew 12:41).

Introduction

As an undergraduate I found myself enrolled in a number of science classes. I quite enjoyed studying physiology, kinesiology, biology, zoology, etc. In these classes I was often surrounded by pre-med students since many of these classes were required for entrance into med-school. Then, for a reason I cannot recall, I took a nutrition class. What I learned in this nutrition class (aside from nutrition itself) was a not-so-subtle clash between the field of medicine and the field of nutrition.

It was common to hear those pursuing a career in nutrition to criticize the medical field. The criticism aimed at western medicine was how their focus was restricted to healing rather than preventing disease. Of course, the physicians had their own critique of the nutritional and holistic approach to healing, as if it were a sort of voodoo. Doctors viewed their disdain for drugs and surgery as naïve and life-threatening.

This bizarre, but understandable, enmity between these fields has seemingly lessened (but, by no means is completely gone) over the years. We have learned that there are certain behaviors that contribute to heart attacks and cancer, and a wise person seeks to avoid engaging in things that will inevitable lead them to an unhealthy life or early death. At the same time, conventional medicine, with its pharmaceuticals, surgeries and often uncomfortable treatments of disease can be lifesaving.

Let us compare that now to the moral/spiritual battle in which we find ourselves engaged with similar components. Like the nutritionist, the Christian seeks to approach their own life and their own culture with an effort to avoid the disease of sin. God has given us guidelines in His word toward this end. There are certain behaviors and environments that spiritually and morally unhealthy that should not be part of public consumption.

It is not difficult to make a biblical argument that cultures/nations that allow and promote grotesque and public immorality and falsehood will yield a people overrun in their own hearts with the damaging effects of sin. It is impractical to think that the endorsement and exploitation of violence, pornography, disrespect for elders and authority figures, abortion, euthanasia, self-centeredness, the myriad of sexual sins and so on, will not be detrimental to the souls of any given society and the collective which those souls form.

There is something to be said for fighting a cultural fight to protect the eyes, ears and hearts of a nation. This should not be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of Mormonism, but I felt much safer, in terms of billboards, driving with my children (and myself) through Salt Lake City than through Las Vegas.

At the same time no cultural battle will ever sufficiently dispense of sin. Sin is a universal disease and churches are to resemble the medical field, Christ Himself being the cure. He is aptly called the Master Physician whose shed blood and broken body is the panacea for the universal human condition of sin and death. Jesus came for those who, by the grace of God, came to know they were plagued with the sickness of sin. When being criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus said:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance (Mark 2:17).

Why do I mention all of this in my introduction to Jonah? Because in our battle to produce a more righteous world—a nation whose God is the Lord (Psalm 33:12), we need to beware of a natural enmity growing in our hearts against those who are not quite as enthusiastic about heralding the law and gospel of the living God. Those, who by the very nature of the case, are the spiritual enemies of that which is good, right and true. Those

who promote that which has tarnished our own hearts and households! It can be very personal. Jonah is an example of someone who harbored an unhealthy disdain for those who were the natural enemies of God's covenant people. Let that simmer as we survey Jonah.

Survey of Jonah

Jonah is a bit different than the other prophetic books in that Jonah himself is the central character. It opens with Jonah's defiance of God's call in his ministry. Jonah is called to "**cry out against**" Nineveh, but Jonah goes to Joppa, pays a fare and gets in a boat going in the exact opposite direction. Joppa is just west of Jerusalem, Tarshish (where Jonah wants to go) would likely be Southern Spain and Nineveh northern Iraq.

Why would Jonah do this? Why would he go "**from the presence of the Lord**" (Jonah 1:3), which in all probability meant a divesting himself of his prophetic office? We're not left to guess. Jonah himself explains why he didn't want to go. He offers the very odd explanation after seeing the repentance of Nineveh and God relenting from His judgment. Normally an evangelist rejoices in the success of his preaching. But not Jonah:

**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.
2 So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for *it is* better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:1-3)!**

How do we explain this? Two things come to mind: First, we must try to grasp just how evil the people of Nineveh actually were. We read that their "**wickedness (had) come**" before the Lord (Jonah 1:2). But just how wicked were they?

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. They have been called the Nazis of the Old Testament. In my studies of Jonah, I had the opportunity to read of what archeologist and historians came to learn regarding how the Assyrians/Ninevites treated their neighboring and conquered nations. At this point I will limit my comments to say that they went out of their way

to instill a deep fear, by way of cruel, creative and unusual torture, into any person or nation that would dare to defy or challenge them.

All this to say that Jonah's reluctance to rejoice may have been caused by what the Ninevites had done to some of his own beloved countrymen. Many years ago I was leading a Bible study where a young woman had a little sister who had been abused by her preschool instructor. I recall at one point making the statement that we don't want anyone to go to hell. She immediately mentioned the name of the accused abuser and said, without hesitation, that she wanted him to go to hell. It was a tense moment.

Another possibility for Jonah's reluctance was that Assyria was the prophesied future conqueror of Israel. Perhaps Jonah thought that if God destroyed Nineveh, it would prove beneficial to Israel. All this to say that Jonah may have had at least somewhat justifiable/understandable reasons for preferring Nineveh be removed from the equation. After all, God had removed other nations.

But God had other plans for Nineveh. He would send them an evangelist, albeit a reluctant one. Jonah had devised his plan to get in a boat to Tarshish but God would direct his steps and send a great storm. The boat on which Jonah slept was being ripped apart and its crew was making every religious and rational effort they could think of to keep it afloat. They threw out all the cargo and each one, though pagans, cried out to their respective god—each one except Jonah.

Now all the attention turns toward Jonah. Why had he not cried out to his God? There must have been something unusual about this storm/event because they seemed to understand that this storm was caused by some transgression on the part of the crew. So, they cast lots to figure this out and it fell on Jonah. Then the interview begins.

They want to know who caused this trouble. What was Jonah's occupation? Where was he from? What is his country? Who are his people? Then Jonah, perhaps unwittingly, becomes an evangelist again. I am not sure who you guys are praying to but...

...I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (Jonah 1:9b).

Whether you're an evangelist, missionary, pastor or church member, God may choose to use you, not merely once you get to your destination, but on your way as well.

Of course, the mariners on this ship want to know how to resolve the issue. Jonah gives the easy answer, **“throw me into the sea” (Jonah 1:12)**. However we read Jonah and his reluctance to go to Nineveh, it doesn't seem it's due to cowardice. At what exact point the crew is converted, it's difficult to say. They quite immediately enter into a time of prayer to the true God at the prospect of throwing an innocent man into the sea. This prayer followed what may have been their first lesson they learned as Christians, which is *'You Cannot Save Yourself.'* They paddled like crazy to get to the shore but could not.

It got down to this: they had to trust the word of God from the lips of Jonah that they would be saved through the shedding of **“innocent blood” (Jonah 1:14)**. They obeyed and threw Jonah into the sea at which time the **“sea ceased from its raging” (Jonah 1:15)**.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows (Jonah 1:16).

I like to think that when we meet those mariners in heaven, they'll inform us that the central point of the book of Jonah was what happened on Jonah's journey over what happened in Nineveh.

We then move to what makes Jonah so fun for Sunday School but also what causes critics of God's word to scoff. God **“prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah” (Jonah 1:17)**. A few brief comments on this:

Was it a whale or a fish? The Hebrew word (*dag*) simply means a class of animal that lives in a body of water. Hebrew taxonomy certainly allows for a swimming mammal. At the same time, it's not as if the word of God must subordinate itself to cultural taxonomic distinctions (as valuable as they may be). But if God puts creatures into three categories (creatures filling the waters, flying above the earth and walking on the earth) we should recognize that to be sufficient.

Is it possible for a man to survive three days in a fish? There is ample evidence that there are sea creatures big enough to hold an entire man and there are examples of people surviving in a sea creature for more than an entire day. All this is well and good. But when it gets right down to it, I find very little difficulty in believing that God Almighty, who spoke all things into being by the word of His mouth, could sustain a man in a fish for three days. It is just these kinds of supernatural things that God used

through history to bring unique and special attention to His plan of redemption (Exodus 4:1-9).

Now we move to Jonah's prayer from within the fish's belly. Here is where doing a single sermon on an entire book is almost heartbreaking for his prayer is rich and deep. But I will only mention this: there is not one petition in Jonah's prayer. His prayer contains thanksgiving, contrition and a rededication of his convictions-He will sacrifice and pay what he had vowed (Jonah 2:9).

Some break Jonah into four sections: Disobedience, preservation, proclamation and correction. It is in the belly of the great fish that God preserves His servant. How uncomfortable, yet valuable. At the conclusion of his prayer the Lord speaks to the fish and Jonah gets vomited onto dry land.

At long last, Jonah has arrived at his mission field. Nineveh is a large city, a **"three-day journey in extent"** (Jonah 3:3) with what some calculate to be a million inhabitants¹ and they are to hear that they have forty days before they **"shall be overthrown"** (Jonah 3:4). We then read these wonderful words,

So the people of Nineveh believed God (Jonah 3:5).

How this all unfolded is difficult to say. Clearly Jonah did not have access to the internet, radio or television. It has been speculated that the story of happened on the ship had reached the Ninevites, so there was great attention given to this new foreign visitor. Whatever be the case, there was national revival which involved the king himself.

The king of Nineveh displayed repentance and remorse. Then he called for a national fast and for the entire nation to turn from their evil ways that they might escape the judgment of God. It is difficult to fathom how, to this day, there are Christians who would resist the whole idea of a national repentance and calling upon the name of the Lord. Here we read of an Old Testament, vile, gentile nation repenting in such a way that...

God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it (Jonah 3:10).

¹ If those who cannot discern their right hand from their left (120,000) are considered children.

That all nations, to this day, might follow the example of Nineveh!

As we read earlier, Jonah was not at all excited about these events. His greatest fear came to pass. God was merciful. It grieved Jonah to the point where he preferred death over life (Jonah 4:3). Sometimes God's ministers require the greatest lessons. Chapter four is all about God's correction of Jonah's twisted thinking. This was a lesson in which God would use various props.

Jonah goes out to the east side of the city to see what might happen. It's been speculated that Jonah was hoping that God would come to His senses and destroy Nineveh, nonetheless. But God, at least as far as this book is concerned is finished with Nineveh. Jonah makes a shelter to watch the city and God accommodates Jonah by creating a plant to give Jonah shade.

But then God prepares a worm to damage the plant, so Jonah loses his shade. Add to that, God prepares a vehement east wind and has the sun beat on Jonah's head (Jonah 4:5-8). So, Jonah goes from grateful, to angry and wanting to die again (Jonah 4:8). God asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry about the plant? Jonah says 'yes...even to death.'

And here comes the final lesson of the book. Jonah felt pity for the plant which he didn't labor to produce, make grow and arrived and left in one night. And yet had no regard for the pity of God over a land of hundreds of thousands of people. It may be argued that Jonah's understandable contempt for the Ninevites displaced an appreciation for a God who chooses to be merciful to sinners.

The story ends there. We don't know what Jonah ended up doing or thinking. But as for me, I teaches me that God may very well wish to extend his pity, love and mercy for someone who I may view (with perhaps justifiable reasons) as an unseemly character or community. But when we are told to preach to every creature, that doesn't mean only the creatures we find appealing.

Christ in Jonah

Where do we find Jesus in Jonah? In twelfth chapter of Matthew 12 and the eleventh chapter of Luke Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees, who are seeking for a sign, that the only sign they will see is "sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39). Jesus then compares Jonah's time in the great fish

with His time in the **“heart of the earth”** which should be understood as the time between His death and resurrection.

Jonah did not die in the fish (though some have argued that) but it served as a type of death (Jonah 2:2 speaks of Sheol) from which he arose and proclaimed life to the Ninevites. But, as Jesus taught, **“a greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:41)**. And the very deliverance enjoyed by the Ninevites was due to the greater than Jonah. Jesus then makes the very disconcerting statement that the **“men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with the generation”** because they responded, as it were, to the types and shadows, whereas we enjoy the Good News in its utter fullness.

Questions for Study

1. How do you feel about your surrounding culture? How does this affect your ministerial attitude toward them (pages 2, 3)?
2. In what ways should we seek to transform our society? How should churches be similar to the medical field (pages 2, 3)?
3. Why do you suppose Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh (pages 4, 5)?
4. What was the first lesson the mariners learned as believers (pages 5, 6)?
5. Discuss Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish. What was absent from his prayer and why do you think that is (page 7)?
6. What did the repentance of Nineveh look like? What can modern nations learn from this (pages 7, 8)?
7. The final chapter of Jonah contains a lesson God gives Jonah. What is that lesson? How does it apply to you (page 8)?
8. In what respect does Jesus compare Himself to Jonah (pages 8, 9)?