

JONAH - the reluctant evangelist

NOT REALLY A BOOK OF PROPHECY



Every now and then I decide I'm going to tidy up my library. I try to keep the books in sections - commentaries in one book case, theological works in another. But the books normally manage to get mixed up. My collection of Gary Larson cartoons somehow ends up in the Old Testament section or my copy of Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy is placed beside Louis Berkhof's Systematic Theology. "How did that book end up there?," I'm left asking. My task is then to try and rearrange the books so they're in their right sections.

When you look at the book of Jonah and its place in the Bible, it, too, seems to be in the wrong section. It seems strange that it's stuck among the books we call Prophets. It really doesn't seem to fit in. All up, there's a grand total of eight words of prophecy spoken (and that's the English - in Hebrew it's only four words). And even those eight words seem to be a bit of a sideline to the overall story of the book.

The book of Jonah is not so much a book of Prophecy as a book about a Prophet. It's a book about the man Jonah, and his relationship with God. But I think there is even more to it than that. It's a book about Israel and her failure. And it's a book about God and His purposes in salvation.

Most of the time - because of its supposed lack of historical context, and also because he is not a prophet to Israel but to foreign nation - the book of Jonah studied in isolation. When it is preached, the historical setting in Israel's history is not thought to be that important. But perhaps this is a mistake. Like all the other Prophets, if we look at Jonah in terms of its setting in Israel's history, we will be in a better position to understand the book.

The only biblical reference we have to Jonah outside the book itself is found in 2 Kings 14:25. Perhaps that's not a whole lot to work with, but it at least gives us a fairly accurate date for Jonah and his prophetic work. Jonah prophesied to the Assyrians around the time of Jeroboam II (c800 - 750BC). And that means Jonah is prophesying not long before Israel fell to the Assyrians - never to rise again.

With that as the setting I would be more inclined to think that the book of Jonah is about Israel and her failure to understand or participate in God's plan.

THEMES IN JONAH

It is helpful to note some of the themes we see in Jonah:

God's Sovereignty

One issue that stands out from the beginning of the book is that God has the whole of the world under his control. The storm, the fish, even the casting of lots is under God's control.

God's Willingness to work with Human Agents

If God has got it so under control, then why does he need Jonah? The fact is God is going to use human agents to carry out his work. He wants Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach.

God's Willingness to Show Compassion on Gentiles

From the sailors on the boat right through to the whole of the city of Nineveh God is willing to show compassion. He is willing to forgive. In fact, as we look through Jonah we see that God's preference is to show compassion rather than judge.

It is easy to see how some of these themes leads us right into the New Testament.

PREACHING

A series on Jonah fits well into a four week bracket - one week per chapter. This gives nice neat units - Jonah is called and runs (chap 1), Jonah repents (chap 2), Jonah preaches in Nineveh (chap 3) and Jonah complains about what God has done (chap 4).

One important thing to keep in mind when preaching through Jonah is the importance of maintaining the drama and the tension of the story. The big tension in the book is "Why did Jonah run?". He runs away in the first chapter but we don't find out why until the last chapter. Try to keep that tension there as you preach through. Don't jump to the end of the book in the first sermon.

I used this series leading up to an evangelistic Invitation service. It worked well in motivating people to evangelism.

SERMON OUTLINES

TALK 1

THE CALL OF JONAH

Introduction

- Unusual book. People think they know it well, or at least parts of it - especially the bit about the whale. People often want to deny that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. They say it couldn't happen.
- Jonah **UNLIKE** any of those other prophets. Only have eight words of prophecy in the whole book. The book is really about the Prophet himself. In the book we learn from Jonah's attitude to those who don't know God, and we learn about God and his purpose for this world.

The State of the Nations

It is helpful to understand the background to the book - the nations involved.

Israel

- Jonah lived in the nation of Israel and had served God there as a Prophet (2 Kings 14:25).
- Israel at this time is in a bad way.
 - It may have looked pretty prosperous.
 - They may have had political stability.
 - They may not have been at war with any other nation. But Israel had moved away from God. They were proud and arrogant.
- God has displayed great patience with them. He keeps calling them to repent and turn back to him through the prophets Elijah and Elisha - but they refuse to listen. The hearts of the people are a long way from God.
- Assyria (Nineveh)
- Assyria was a significant nation in the area at that time - but a wild and brutal bunch. They had gained a wide reputation for their disgusting war practices including the following:
 - When they took over a town in battle they would take any survivors and impale them on stakes in front of the town.

- Assyrian leaders would often cut off the heads of foes and wear them around their necks.
- After a battle they'd pile up the skulls of enemies making pillars of them.
- The relationship between Israel and Assyria was far from being close. The Israelites hated their northern neighbours. And the Assyrians felt much the same way about them. And this is the nation that Jonah was called to preach to.

The Call And The Response

- The book has an abrupt opening (Jonah 1:1-2). Jonah's response to the call from God is instant - he runs off in exactly the opposite direction. (Jonah 1:1-3) God called him to go to the nation north east and Jonah heads south to catch a boat west to Spain.
- What is he doing? Why doesn't he do what God told him to? At this point we can only speculate - you have to wait to chapter 4 to find out.
- Perhaps we wasn't too keen to pass on any message from God to these pagan dogs? Why would he want to go and tell them to REPENT? He would have been just as happy to let them get what they deserve from God.
- Perhaps it was the task that made Jonah run the other way - preaching to a city of 120 000 - people with a nasty reputation for how they treat their enemies.

The Storm and the Response

- Jonah buys a ticket and jumps a boat for Spain.
- The boat puts out to sea. Jonah would have been feeling rather confident as they pulled up the anchor and set sail. But that confidence was about to be shattered. God sends a storm.
- The sailors all begin to pray to their foreign gods. They finally decide to cast lots to find out who is responsible for the storm. The lot falls on Jonah. He tells them he is running away from God and that the only way to calm the storm is to throw him overboard.
- The sailors are not willing to do that - they don't want to be responsible for taking his life. And you can understand that. If Jonah being there can cause that storm imagine what KILLING him could do! They try to row the boat to shore to save his life - and theirs.
- Finally, when the storm becomes even more fierce, they agree to throw him over. Jonah knew the storm was his fault. He knew that he deserved to be thrown over.
- Jonah is thrown into the sea where he is swallowed by a huge fish.

Contrasting Attitudes

- There are some amazing contrasts in this passage between Jonah and those around him:
 - The pagan boat captain has to tell Jonah the prophet to pray
 - The pagan sailors work to save Jonah's life when he had endangered theirs
 - The sailors begin to worship the true God while Jonah's running away from God
 - The sailors understand the seriousness of Jonah's disobedience better than he does

Conclusion - Why Did God Send Jonah?

- Why did God send Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh? After all, they weren't his people - they were just another nation.

Here are three possible reasons:

1. To make Israel Jealous: God wants to shake his people - Israel - out of their apathy. He sent Jonah to Nineveh in the hope that Israel will become jealous. If Israel sees the Ninevites respond to God's message to them they will realise how stupid they have been - how hard their hearts have been toward God.
2. God's plan was to bless the Nations: God's plan was always to bring blessing to the whole world - not just Israel. In his promises to Abraham, God said the whole world would be blessed. Israel wasn't too keen on the idea of other nations being saved. But God had always had a different plan - even if Israel couldn't see it or didn't like it. Jonah's preaching to the Gentiles is another step in the fulfilment of God's plan.
3. As a forerunner to Jesus: Jonah is a forerunner to Jesus - the one who would bring BLESSING to the whole world. I doubt that Jonah would make it into the list of Top 10 Prophets. He's hardly what you'd call the model prophet. But Jonah is the Prophet that Jesus compares himself to. He is not like Jonah in his disobedience. But he is like Jonah in that he brings the message of salvation to the world. Jonah took the message to Nineveh that they could turn to God and be saved. Jesus is the one who brings that message of salvation to the whole world. He is the one who shows us how we can be made right with God. The prophet Jonah - for all his faults and imperfections - points us to Jesus.

TALK 2 SALVATION COMES FROM GOD

Introduction

- One of the most frustrating things children can do is try to exert their independence - try to go it alone. Last Summer we had that problem with Jacob. He thought he could SWIM - but the fact is he couldn't. When you are in the pool with him he wrestles and struggles to get out of your arms. He doesn't want to do what you want - he thinks he can swim. As soon as he does he starts to sink to the bottom of the pool. At that point he is trying to grab your arm - gasping for breath, gurgling for help. All you can think is "Why did you try and push me away."
- There are a few parallels between the way children act with their parents and the way Jonah acted with God. Jonah has made an attempt to be independent and he has made a huge mistake.

Jonah is in the Whale

- Jonah is now inside the belly of a huge fish that God sent to swallow him.

A Changed Man?

- There was a saying during the war that "there are no atheists in foxholes". We could say the same thing about the story of Jonah: There are no atheists inside the belly of whales. When Jonah finds himself in the belly of the whale the first thing he does is call out to the Lord.
- Now hang on a moment. Isn't this the same Jonah who only a few paragraphs earlier was running away from God? And now he has the hide to call out to God for help.

He was the one who got himself into this position and now he wants God to get him out of it.

- The form of this passage is like a psalm. In his psalm, Jonah gives us a graphic account of what happened after he was thrown over the side of the boat.
- Scattered throughout the psalm he praises God - thanks God for saving him from drowning. Jonah knows that his rescue was God's doing - it was God he had to thank for the fact he was saved.
- From the things Jonah says in this psalm he seems to be a changed man.

Salvation Comes From God

- Jonah's psalm finishes on a great high note: "Salvation comes from God". I have no doubt that Jonah KNEW that to be true before this whole incident. But now he has experienced it in a very powerful way. Jonah knows that's true for the sailors on the ship as well (see 2:8 cf 1:5 & 1:16).
- Through all of this Jonah has learned a powerful lesson. He has tasted again God's grace. Now, maybe he is ready to go to Nineveh - a city where men cling to foreign gods. Now, maybe he is ready to show them the GRACE that could be theirs if only they would turn to the living God.

Conclusion

- This chapter closes as Jonah is spewed onto the beach by the whale. I have seen what is inside a fish. Can you imagine what he would have looked like after being in that for three days?
- Jonah is back on dry land. He has experienced again God's grace. Now maybe he is ready to do what God has called him to do.
- Knowing It & Living It
- There is a huge difference between knowing the truth and living the truth. All the things that Jonah said while he was inside the fish were all things that he knew to be true before he set foot on the boat.
- But even though he knew it he didn't live it. Even though he knew all that about God, it still didn't stop him running away from God.
- At that point we can be a lot like Jonah. We can know the truth about what God has done for us in Jesus - but that doesn't mean we always live it out. We can know that we have been saved from our sin - but sometimes our lives don't show it.
- Are you living up to the knowledge you have?
- The Sign of Jonah
- Jonah is the only prophet Jesus compares himself to (Matt 12:40). Jesus compares his death and resurrection to the experience that Jonah has gone through. While Jonah was in the whale, he could say with confidence that salvation comes from God. But little did he know the plan of salvation that God would fulfil through Jesus. Jonah's experience foreshadows the way in which God would ultimately bring that salvation to men. For Jonah it was three days in the belly of the whale. For Jesus it was three days in the grave.

TALK 3 THE CALL OF JONAH - TAKE 2

Introduction

- Jonah chapter 3 opens with the call of Jonah - TAKE 2. It's a repeat of the first call of Jonah from the beginning of chapter 1 - but this time Jonah obeys God.

- I'm sure all the fears and doubts he had about going to Nineveh are probably still there - but he is not going to act on those fear and doubts. This time he is going to obey God.
- Jonah is a changed man - his time inside the fish has seen to that. I suppose there is nothing quite like a life-threatening experience on a boat and three days inside a whale to modify your behaviour.

Jonah Preaches

- Jonah makes the trip to Nineveh. From where he'd been vomited on the beach to Nineveh would have taken about a month.
- You'd think that a month would give you a great opportunity to prepare a real hum dinger
- of a message to preach in Nineveh - a really powerful and challenging sermon with lots of good illustrations and a powerful conclusion. Well, this is the message that Jonah preached: "40 more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." Not what you would call one of the great sermons of all time - not really a masterpiece of communication and oratory. Sort of ... short ... to the point. But that was the message that God had given Jonah to preach. That was the message that the people of Nineveh needed to hear. So that was the message Jonah preached.

The Ninevites Respond

- The response of the Ninevites was immediate and overwhelming - they "believed God" (3:5). In that one statement so much is being said.
 - They believed in the God Jonah was proclaiming.
 - They believed God was right and justified in pronouncing this judgement on them.
- The Ninevites BELIEVE God and respond in the only way they know how - by showing sorrow and regret for the way they've ignored and rejected God. They were grief-stricken at the realisation of the offence they'd been to God. This remorse wasn't just among a few people in Nineveh - the whole city responded.
- The King was convicted and declared a fast. They wore sack-cloth - even the animals were to fast. Seems strange getting the animals to fast - but we still have things like that today. It wasn't so long ago - when horse were used to pull funeral carriages - that the horses wore black supposedly to indicate that the horses were sad about the death of that person. Even today most funeral directors do a similar thing - they have black cars - to indicate that the cars are sad about the death of this person.
- NB the progression the Ninevites go through
 1. They acknowledge their SINFULNESS before God.
 2. They express their SORROW at their sinfulness.
 3. Their sorrow translates into ACTION - fasting and sack-cloth.
- It's exactly the same process in becoming a Christian:
 1. We have to acknowledge our sin before God. If we don't think we're sinful then we won't think that we need to be saved or forgiven. We won't turn to God.
 2. We must be sorry about our sinfulness. There are plenty of people who are

more than willing to acknowledge that they are SINFUL, but who have no SORROW about it. They simply don't care.

3. We have to respond to God. We have to ask him to forgive us. We have to respond with the only ACTION that God wants from us - TRUST in his SON.

God Shows Compassion

- What we see happening with the whole city responding is an amazing thing.
- I remember going to the Billy Graham Crusade in 1979. It was amazing to see all those people respond to the Gospel message - a few hundred - perhaps even a thousand. What Jonah has seen is a whole city - 120 000 people or more all turn to God in repentance.
- But that is not the most amazing part of the story. The most amazing part is found in the last verse (3:10). GOD HAD COMPASSION ON THEM. God was under no obligation to have compassion on them. They deserved his judgement. God would have been justified in bringing about the destruction of the city. Even the King acknowledges that (3:8b-9). The most amazing thing in this whole book is not that Jonah was swallowed by a whale or that 120 00 people responded to his message. The most amazing thing is that God forgives them - he has compassion on them.

Conclusion - Compassion Vs Punishment

God would rather show compassion than punish. We see that...

a) IN THE STORY OF JONAH

- If God had simply wanted to punish the Ninevites there would have been no need to send Jonah. He could have just sent destruction on the city. The fact he gave them 40 days grace also shows his willingness to forgive if they would respond. (It's a bit like when the Electricity company sends you a reminder notice and a final warning before they cut off your power.)
- God's overwhelming desire is to show compassion to those who turn to him. Those who are REPENTANT - who turn to God and seek his forgiveness - can be ASSURED that he will give that forgiveness, that he will show compassion.

b) IN JESUS

- The things we see in the story of Jonah are only a FAINT SHADOW of what was to come in Jesus. If we see God's desire to show COMPASSION rather than PUNISH in the story of Jonah how much more clearly do we see it in Jesus. (John 3:16, Romans 3)

TALK 4

MAN SPAT OUT BY FISH

SPITS DUMMY

Introduction

- We all like to see a happy ending - "they all lived happily ever after" type endings. Most movies finish that way. (Use an up-to-date example of a movie with a happy ending) If we wanted to see a happy ending to the story of Jonah you would have to get LIQUID PAPER and white out chapter 4 - the last chapter. Chapter 3 would be a great ending to the story - but that is not the point of the book. The book ends with a surprise and a challenge to us and our attitudes.

The Reason Jonah Ran

- The book ends with Jonah unhappy. You'd think he'd got the right result - 120 000 people turning to God. But Jonah is ANGRY with God. Why? Because he KNEW God would forgive these people. Jonah is angry because God is a compassionate and gracious God. Jonah even says that is why he ran away in the first place.
- Jonah is saying that he objects to God being gracious. Funny, Jonah didn't seem to mind that God was compassionate and gracious when he was sucking in lungs full of water on the bottom of the sea (chap2). And the outrageous behaviour from Jonah doesn't end there.

Hoping For The Worst

- Jonah heads to the edge of the city. What in the world is Jonah doing? The answer is simple. Jonah has gone to the edge of town to sit and watch. He has got a deck chair, a cool drink and a beach umbrella, and he's waiting to see if God might change his mind and destroy the city anyway. Jonah is hoping for the very worst for these people.
- Can you believe this guy? He wants to see these people destroyed. He wants to see them judged and punished by God. He doesn't want to see them saved.

The Vine Lesson

- God teaches Jonah a lesson. God causes a vine to grow up over him. The next day God provided a worm to eat the vine. Just to drive the point home a little more God also sent a hot wind to blow on Jonah.
- Jonah gets again angry about the vine dying - so angry again that he wishes he was dead. God says "Do you have any right to be angry about the vine?" - same questions as before. Jonah says he does.
- God patiently explains to Jonah that he has no right to be angry about the vine dying. Jonah didn't plant it or tend it or make it grow. It wasn't Jonah's vine - he had done nothing for it.
- If Jonah thinks he should be concerned about a vine then God says "Shouldn't I be concerned about a city of 120 000?" And there's a great description of the Ninevites - they can't even tell their right hand from their left.
- God is saying to Jonah "How can you be so heartless".

Jonah, Jesus and Us

- Contrast the attitude of Jonah and the attitude of God to the lost. God wants to show compassion - he has an overwhelming concern for the lost. God who wants to see the lost saved. Jonah couldn't care less about them.
- Jesus summed up his life and work as being "to seek and save the lost". Jesus told the parables about the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. He said that the whole of heaven rejoices over one sinner repenting. That's God's attitude to the LOST.
- In the story of Jonah the painful contrast is there. God - with a heart for the lost. Jonah - with no concern for the lost.
- Now I want you to imagine that those two represent either end of a scale - God on one end and Jonah on the other. The scale is a measure of a persons concern for the lost - for those who don't know God, those who have not placed their faith in Jesus. Where do you fit on the scale?
- We would like to think that Jonah's attitude doesn't exist today - but it does. Back in 1796 the Church of Scotland was considering the prospect of establishing a Foreign Mission Program. They wanted to establish a program to take the message of Jesus to those who hadn't heard. One minister opposed this move. He said this : "To spread abroad the knowledge of the gospel among barbarous and heathen

nations seems to me highly preposterous." That sort of talk obviously sits right on the JONAH end of our scale.

- We would like to think that we are up near the other end of the scale. We would like to think that we DO have a heart for the lost. Ask you one other question: "What are YOU DOING about the lost?" Did you just think of all your excuses about why you don't evangelise?
- We may look at Jonah and think he was a heartless person for not wanting to see the Ninevites saved - BUT HOW DIFFERENT ARE YOU? If we're not actively doing something to show our heart for the lost then we are no better than Jonah.
- Can I suggest some ways that you can demonstrate your heart for the lost:

1. NEVER FORGET THE SALVATION WE HAVE IN JESUS

- Remember Jonah's words (2:8-9). Yet he could still have no concern for those in Nineveh. If we understand God's grace we will want to see others come to know God in the same way we do.

2. PRAY FOR THEM - SPECIFICALLY

- You don't have to be an EVANGELIST like Billy Graham to have a concern for the lost. Pray specifically for people that you know who are not Christians. Pray that they might become Christians.

3. SUPPORT GOSPEL PREACHING

- It might be that you give money to mission organisations or even our church. But you can do more. Make sure you support the preaching of the Gospel by attending things and inviting others to attend things. Invite people who aren't Christians to come to Outreach Events.

4. BE READY TO TELL OTHERS

- It is not always easy to explain the Gospel to people. Sometimes we might be a bit shy or scared about doing it. Its OK to be shy and scared. What's NOT OK is being indifferent or simply not caring about the lost. God wants us to have a heart that is just like HIS - a heart that BEATS with the same beat as his - a heart for the lost.

Luke Tattersall