

SESSION #39

JONAH (part 2)

5. Applications

In Session 38 our main focus was on Jonah himself. Now we want to dig a little deeper to discover what *God* is doing in and through Jonah's story. Along the way we'll pick up some applications.

Chapter 1 gives us the call of God. Jonah's motivation for disobeying the call of God is probably the best rationalization you could find anywhere in the Bible for not doing what God asks that person to do. He doesn't want to obey God because he has such a love and care for his own people! It's a great rationalization.

But even so, the problem is that it is still disobedience. It doesn't matter what color you paint it or how nicely you dress it up, at the heart of the matter it is still disobedience. And even with the best rationalizations in the world, it is never right to do wrong. We are generally very creative people when it comes to finding ways around the will of God, finding ways to make my will bigger and better and more important than God's will. And Jonah's first lesson for us is, I think, a very relevant one: it is never right to do wrong.

James Boice has provided us with an interesting scenario. He said, "*when you run away from God like Jonah did, your path will always be down.*" The first verses of chapter 1 show us this reality in Jonah's experience. First of all, he goes down to Joppa, that port city. Then he goes down to the ship with his one-way ticket in hand. As the ship gets underway, he goes down into the sides of the ship and falls asleep in the middle of that storm. In due course, thanks to the great fish, he ends up down at the bottom of the sea.

Down, down, down, down. The interesting thing about that scenario is when you read the story of what Jonah was doing and where he was going, verse 3 says he began by going "up" – he "arose". In truth, his path was never up from that point on; it was just down, down and down. The same is true for us: when we try to run away from God, our path will always be down.

Even though Jonah is disobedient to God and going in the wrong direction and going down in his own personal experience, God isn't frustrated. He isn't sitting on His heavenly throne, wringing His hands, and saying, "*Oh no! What am I going to do now?*" God will still accomplish His purposes even when God's people disobey. What was God's purpose through Jonah, in general? God's purpose through Jonah was that people would come to know who God is and respond positively to Him.

God's call specified that he was to go to the city of Nineveh so there was a specific group of people in view. But in the big picture, that was what God's purpose was for Jonah. Well, what happened in chapter 1? Did anyone come to know God and respond to Him positively?

Yes, there were some who did. Jonah had told the ship's captain and sailors that the problem they were having with the great storm was because of Jonah. "*I'm the root of the problem. I'm running away from the God of heaven. If you get rid of me, you won't have a problem any more. So throw me overboard.*"

And they finally ended up doing what he asked because they were in desperate straits. Having thrown Jonah overboard, what happens to those sailors up on the deck of that ship? The Bible tells us that the storm suddenly goes quiet and the sailors all fall down and worship the living God, the God of Jonah, and offer sacrifices and praise to Him. Was that God's purpose through Jonah's life? Oh, absolutely. Did Jonah get to enjoy the results of his ministry?

He didn't have a clue – he didn't know anything of what was happening way above his head. But God will always accomplish His purpose. If we are not the ones whom God is able to use, then He will use some other means, some other person. And we will miss out on the blessing.

Chapter 2 – Jonah and the Fish; the disciplined prophet. It is an evidence of the marvellous grace of God that He would prepare a special fish to come and preserve Jonah's life. And Jonah realizes this when he gets inside that fish – he knows this is not punishment. Oh, I'm sure it wasn't comfortable – sloshing around in the acids of the stomach of some great fish in extreme darkness with all those awful smells and sounds!

A horrible experience, but nevertheless he knew that if it wasn't for that special fish sent by God, he would have quickly drowned.

That fish was God's vehicle of deliverance. And sometimes our misery is God's grace extended to us, a vehicle of deliverance He provides for us in His discipline of us. The entire chapter is Jonah's prayer, but you won't find any petition at all in that prayer. Jonah doesn't ask God to save him or rescue him because he knows that God has already rescued him, though he is now under discipline. This three-day, three-night experience must have given Jonah a brand new appreciation for God's wonderful love and astonishing care for him in spite of his disobedience.

In chapter 3, having been vomited out on the dry land, Jonah now turns in the right direction as an obedient man of God. He goes to the city of Nineveh and we see now the work of God. Jonah preaches what is recorded as a one-sentence sermon.

Maybe that's all he had to say as he preached his way through the streets of Nineveh. It turns out to be perhaps the most dynamic and most successful sermon ever preached, because an entire city of probably close to one million people turned spontaneously to God as a result of his ministry. He walked through that city proclaiming, *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

Luke 11:30 tells us that when Jonah came into that great city, he was *"a sign to them"*. Certainly the amazing story of what had happened to him would have been relayed by the sailors when they came ashore. CNN would have been there with all their cameras and mics. By the time Jonah gets to Nineveh they know this guy!

And it must have been astonishing to them that the man who was the center of this amazing story was now walking in their streets when he should have drowned. And he's telling them about the God who did all of that. No wonder he was a sign to them! His story brought terrific credibility to the message he delivered on behalf of Jehovah God.

What a contrast in response between what the Ninevites did after hearing God's message, and what God's own people of Israel did time after time when God's prophets brought His message to His own people. They refused to hear, they refused to repent.

But here was a wicked, heathen city that turned *en masse* in repentance the very first time they heard God's message.

If you look at the story of Jonah up to this point, it's about a missionary endeavor to a foreign nation, delivering the message of God and urging repentance. If that was the whole purpose of the ministry of Jonah, then the final chapter, chapter 4, is absolutely unnecessary. However, if we look at the context of all four chapters we may well conclude that chapter 4 is the most important chapter of them all. It isn't just a P.S. added on to this little book.

The fact that this chapter is included, with the interaction that goes on here between Jonah and God, shows that God is much more concerned about His servants than He is about their service. God is more concerned about you than about what you do. If God was only concerned about Jonah being a successful evangelist, then the book would have concluded with chapter 3. Jonah's ministry to Nineveh was over. But the work God had been doing in *Jonah* wasn't finished yet.

Which brings us to chapter 4 – Jonah and the Lord, the disappointed prophet, and the heart of God. Here we have a series of interactions between Jonah and God as Jonah sits outside the city of Nineveh, having preached his message and seen the results.

Still he waits here for God's nuclear thunderbolt to fall on this wicked city, because that's what he wanted. He could hardly believe that these people would be spared even though they had repented. Now he waits for God to destroy them.

It's a very hot desert climate, so Jonah built himself a little shelter, but it quickly fell down. So God has mercy on him and raises up a little leafy gourd plant to shade Jonah's head. Jonah is absolutely delighted with this plant.

God had earlier "prepared" the great fish. Then 4:6 says that God "prepared" the plant. But God "prepares" two more things. The first is a worm which burrows into the plant, and the plant dies overnight. The next day, God "prepared" a vehement east wind which increased the ferocity of the sun's rays pounding down on Jonah once again.

And he becomes very miserable and angry. He is so mad he tells God he would rather die! Look at Jonah here for a moment and ask, *“What makes Jonah happy? And what makes Jonah unhappy? What makes him glad, what makes him mad?”* You will discover an astonishing thing about this man of God: he has a case of perverted priorities. He gets very glad about some small aspect of his own comfort – that little plant that provided some shade. Now the plant has died, which makes Jonah very mad. He should have been glad that the Ninevites repented. But he’s not. He is absolutely mad that the Ninevites have not yet been destroyed.

What could be called the Jonah Syndrome is described for us in chapter 4. It’s not just an ancient syndrome; it’s a modern problem as well. Bible scholar, Mariano DeGangi, puts it this way: *“Jonah is a representative of all narrow-minded rationalists waiting for God to come around to their way of thinking while God is waiting for them to come around to His way of loving.”*

This is the tension between God and Jonah in chapter 4. Jonah refuses to love those people like God loves those people of Nineveh. In doing so, Jonah reflects the attitudes of his entire nation of Israel who had lost sight of their mission as God’s people to communicate the love and grace of God to other people. They had lost sight of that; they had lost a heart for other people.

God had placed His people in a very strategic geographic spot on the map of the world. They were exactly in the center of the meeting of three major continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. It wasn’t an accident of geographic history that God set aside the Promised Land here in this most strategic context. From that particular location Israel could have reached out very easily into three different continents with the life, love and message of God. But they didn’t.

The book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible that ends with God asking an unanswered question. We don’t know how Jonah answered that question. I think the reason is quite clear: we don’t need to know Jonah’s answer. We need to pause at the end of the book of Jonah and hear God’s question addressed to you, me and all God’s people. *“Should I not be concerned about your great city?”*... or the town or community in which we live? If God is concerned like this, shouldn’t you and I also share His great

heartbeat for humanity? If we call ourselves the people of God, we need to share His compassion and love those whom He loves. Beware the perversion of priorities!

The next session will take us to the book of Nahum, a prophet who also had a focus on Nineveh but one which was very different from Jonah's.
