

Jonah: the Prophet of Israel's Hopes

Do you ever find yourself giving God advice about what He should or should not do in some matter that involves you? Do you sometimes pray, "God, I want you to help me to do really well in this test" ... or, "I pray that I would get this job after my interview tomorrow", or "God, you know I need this situation to work out just this way - could you please make it happen?" I find myself praying like that all the time, telling God what I think He should know already, which is my own opinion on how things ought to be done.

The good news is that God doesn't seem to take my advice very seriously. He surprises me all the time with the course of action He chooses, with the way He answers my prayers. He doesn't give me what I want, at least not in the way I thought it should be. He seems to prefer to do the thing that will be for my greatest good -- which sometimes involves things like humbling experiences and learning hard lessons -- things I wouldn't have chosen for myself.

Today, we're going to look at one of the famous stories of the Old Testament, the story of Jonah and the whale, except the whale wasn't a whale, it was a large fish and it wasn't really the main part of the story. The main part of the story has to do with the kind of prayers Jonah prayed. They were a lot like the prayers I pray, the kind where he advised God about how to look after His people, Israel.

When Jonah prayed what was on his heart, he asked God to protect and defend His people Israel, and to give them victory over their enemies, over those who wished to destroy them. At the time Jonah lived, probably in the early to middle years of the 8th century B.C. -- think 780 - 750 years before the birth of Christ -- at that time, there was one major threat to Israel and that was Assyria. Assyria was a stronger power than Egypt or Babylon at that time and their cruelty towards those they won a victory over was infamous. Nobody wanted to fall to Assyria and so I'm sure Jonah prayed that God would keep Israel safe from them.

Let's meet this prophet. Verse 1 says this:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, son of Amitai.

We've met him once before, in 2 Kings 14:25 which refers to a prophetic word that Yahweh had given through Jonah, son of Amitai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.

In this book, the prophetic word that God has for Jonah to deliver is one that causes the prophet to run from his calling.

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD. (Jonah 1:2,3)

The text makes it clear that Jonah wasn't running from the Assyrians or from the people of Israel -- he was running away from God. But why? God had given him the task of preaching against the capital city of the Assyrians and you would think that

Jonah would enjoy bringing a word of rebuke and judgment against Israel's enemies. Why, then, does he head for a seaport and get on a ship that's on its way to the other end of the Mediterranean Sea?

Tarshish is through the Straits of Gibraltar and a little bit north and west to southern Spain. That's about as far away from Nineveh as anyone Jonah had ever known had travelled.

"But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish." There is some mystery to this as we begin our study of this prophet. Why would Jonah, who knew the LORD, who was God's spokesman and had prophesied and been proven accurate in that prophecy, why would he think for a minute that he could hide from God?

Or did he think he could hide from God? Did he think that he could put a monkey wrench in God's plans by running the way he did? Did he imagine that if God couldn't make him go to Nineveh, that He wouldn't be able to find anyone to go and His plans would fail? That seems to be closer to the mark, as we'll see as the journey continues.

Then Yahweh sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish!"

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

It seemed that everyone on ship had some sense that this storm was sent from God, or from 'a god', except Jonah, who was just happy to be hidden in his own space under the deck. They even had such a sense that a god was involved that they figured it must be somebody's fault, that god must be punishing someone on board, and so they cast lots and Jonah was fingered:

So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

When you stop and think about it, these rough old sailors had great faith, a real confidence that these big events in their lives were ordered by God and that God's judgment was on them as much as some seasonal storm front. And they figured that because Jonah knew the God who was causing this storm and he knew what he had done to make God angry, that he would also know what had to be done to make the

storm calm down.

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

The men didn't want to do this, so they tried rowing back to land, but the storm just intensified and they finally had to give up.

Then they cried to the LORD, "O Yahweh, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for You, O Yahweh, have done as You pleased."

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD and they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to Him. But Yahweh provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

Notice what has taken place in the minds of the sailors. They began the voyage as believers in a whole collection of 'gods', now they are in awe of Yahweh and offering Him sacrifices. As for Jonah, he has demonstrated that he knows the voice of God. He knew what action they should take in order to save their lives and the ship, and finally they agreed to do it -- and it worked. Jonah was right.

But now he is depending on a large sea creature to keep him alive and he has some thoughts about it. The second chapter of Jonah contains Jonah's prayer to the LORD:

In my distress I called to Yahweh and He answered me.

From the depths of the grave I called for help and You listened to my cry.

You hurled me into the deep; into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me;

All Your waves and breakers swept over me. (2:2,3)

From there he describes his perilous situation and how God rescued him from it.

Then, in verse 7:

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You LORD,

And my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple.

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You

What I have vowed I will make good

Salvation comes from Yahweh. (vv.7-9)

And the LORD God told the fish to get rid of its passenger, to vomit poor Jonah up onto the dry land, and it obeyed.

Notice how this chapter concludes like the first one, this time with Jonah being the one to make sacrifices and fulfill vows to Yahweh -- or at least to promise to do so. Chapter one ended with the sailors doing that, now Jonah's faith is united with theirs.

Chapter 3 - and Jonah hears the call of God again to go to Nineveh and this time he obeys. Jonah walks through the city, loudly declaring his simple message: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." The Ninevites now become the newest ones to believe in Yahweh -- they hear and they fear. Verse 5:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Even the king got into the act, taking off his royal robes and putting on sackcloth, then sitting down in the dust. He issued a decree that called on the people to humble themselves in the same way he had, to call urgently on God, and to give up their evil ways and their violence.

Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish. (3:9)

And chapter 3 ends with the crucial event in the book of Jonah the prophet:

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened. (v. 10)

So Jonah, although his only sermon is a very brief one, was a wildly successful preacher. His message had changed the spiritual climate of an entire city and its citizens had become believers in God and had begun to live in a new way, a way that rejected their old patterns of evil and violence. You might think that Jonah would be pleased with the results of his mission to Nineveh:

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to Yahweh, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Yahweh, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

And now we know why Jonah ran away. It wasn't because he didn't believe in God, but because he did. He knew that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who changes His mind about sending the disasters that humans deserve. And because God is like that, because that is God's character, His nature, Jonah was afraid that He would find a reason to turn away from punishing the Assyrians of Nineveh. Part of a prophet's gift is that he can see into the future and Jonah could see the Assyrians coming against the people of Israel, attacking and defeating them in battle, destroying their cities and enslaving the people. He could see that, if God were to spare Nineveh, the end result would be very harsh for the northern kingdom. He actually resented God's mercy for foreigners and said it would be better for him to die than to see God's grace to outsiders.

Some historians believe that Jonah's message was followed by genuine repentance, that the Assyrians under the king of that day were less hostile and cruel for as much as a whole generation. Later, they reverted to their old ways and became the enemy of everyone around them. They did come against Samaria; they did capture Israel and deport its citizens, and Jonah's fears were realized. But, in the meantime, God's heart went out to that generation of people, to that king who was willing to humble himself, to that city of people who turned from evil to honor Him.

But God wasn't finished with Jonah, either:

Yahweh replied, "Have you any right to be angry?" Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then Yahweh God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.

When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do. I am angry enough to die!"

But Yahweh said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (4:4-11)

What's the lesson here for Jonah? You are concerned about yourself -- fair enough -- but aren't there bigger issues in this world than your convenience, even your happiness? Aren't there lost people that need to be found again? Aren't there spiritually ignorant people who need to know God? Jonah, you're upset about a vine that was offering you a little bit of relief from the scorching wind, but I am concerned about a whole city full of people who don't know right from left, or right from wrong!

While Jonah was busy telling God what to do, God was showing Jonah that His prophet didn't know everything, and especially he was missing God's heart for lost people. Jonah's priorities were off. His concerns were only for his own people while God was concerned for the whole world.

Here's where I think Jonah speaks to us most powerfully today. We see so little, from our vantage point, of what is going on in the world. We have no idea, really, what God is doing and so we worry, we get into a negative mindset, we complain about things and part of the reason is that we just can't see everything that is happening. We pray as if God didn't know our needs, as if He didn't care about the people we are praying for, but nothing could be further from the truth. God cares deeply, and His compassion is extended to every person.

So, here are some very practical applications from our text today:

1. Be careful that your prayers are positive, that they express God's love for the whole world. In other words, pray for people, even those who are doing evil things. Pray that they will be healed of their spiritual blindness and brought into the glorious light of the Son of God. Pray for God to bring good out of evil. Pray for God to bring healing out of a brokenness that is hurting others. Try to gain God's perspective, and to reflect His heart, in your prayers.

2. Don't assume that, on those occasions when things don't turn out exactly how you

were praying, that God isn't answering your prayer. It's very likely that He will answer your prayers in a way you don't expect, in a way that might seem like a rejection of your request, but then you realize that He answered your prayer in a way that served a bigger purpose than what you had in mind.

3. Pray according to what you know of God's character. Jonah knew God's character and, because He didn't like the result, He prayed, or at least acted, in the opposite spirit to what God wanted. To be effective in prayer, we need to ask God to do the kinds of things that we know He wants to do -- and that's often why we see such great results when we pray for healing or for someone to come to faith or for breakthroughs over evil in people's lives.

4. Pray with faith. I'm struck by the faith that is exhibited in the lives of people in this story, whether by sailors who saw God at work in the storm or Ninevites who believed God's warning of judgment. Believing God is a great place to start with any effort of prayer. The book of Hebrews tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God, but then tells us that God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. Let's be a people who earnestly seek the Lord, praying His will into the situations that are on our hearts, for His glory.