

Jonah

Few Old Testament stories are as well known as the story of Jonah and the whale. When we teach that story to young children, the focus tends to be on the fact that Jonah ran away from God by taking a ship in the opposite direction from Nineveh, Jonah's intended destination. God stopped Jonah's flight by sending a storm which resulted in Jonah being thrown overboard and being saved by God because he was swallowed by a big fish or whale. After three days in the belly of the whale, Jonah is regurgitated and proceeds to obey the Lord. All this is told in the first chapter of Jonah. What we often neglect is the rest of the story, a story that speaks of Jonah's continued failure to do what God asked of him.

As we know God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against the city because of their sin. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrian Empire was becoming a mortal enemy of the northern kingdom of Israel. As we recall, the nation of Israel had split into two after Solomon, with the northern kingdom name Israel and the southern kingdom named Judah. Israel, being in the north, was next in the sights of Assyria, and Assyria had every intention of attacking and pillaging Israel to make itself strong. A man named Jeroboam II was king of Israel at that time, and Jonah was a prophet during his reign.

Jeroboam II, not a relative of Jeroboam I, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, continued to lead his nation in sinful rebellion against the Lord. Jeroboam I had built two golden calves, one in the north of his kingdom and one in the south, and he had invited the people of his nation to worship at these two shrines instead of going to Jerusalem to worship the true God. Jeroboam II did not change this practice and continued to lead the people away from the Lord by supporting the worship of those golden calves. We would expect that a prophet like Jonah would have had a few things to say about those golden calves, but he is silent on the matter. Instead, he tells his king, Jeroboam II, that the kingdom of Israel would be able to reclaim some of the land it had lost in previous battles. This, by the way, was a brief reprieve before the full attack of the Assyrians a few decades later. It wasn't that Jonah was speaking from his own authority, for we are told that his words of hope to Jeroboam II were given to him by God. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord, but he seemed to want to announce only good news, and he seems hesitant to tell Jeroboam II to change his ways and turn from idol worship. Unlike the other prophets of his time, Jonah had no words of warning for his own people.

Jonah did have a word of warning for Nineveh and the Assyrians, the original message God had given Jonah, the one he wanted to avoid bringing. In spite of the fact that Jonah seems hesitant to deliver bad news from the Lord, we might think that he would be quite happy to go to Nineveh and announce God's impending judgement but, instead, he runs away. It wasn't that he was afraid for his life, for who wants to deliver bad news to a powerful and vicious nation? Jonah runs away for another reason.

As Jonah goes to Nineveh, his warnings are rather abrupt. He utters just a few words (forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed.), and he offers no solution in that he doesn't call Nineveh to repentance. Yet, although to properly announce God's warning would have taken a full three days, by noon of the first day

Nineveh is on its knees in repentance. They take Jonah's words seriously. (Contrast their quick response to the deaf ears of God's own people who had thousands of words spoken by multiple prophets and yet did not repent.) Jonah quits his job early and goes to sit on a hill outside of the city, hoping against hope that God will still destroy Nineveh even though they did repent. When his own personal comfort is compromised by a rootworm which destroyed the plant that provided him with some shade, he shows his frustration and anger. God confronts Jonah and asks him why he is so angry. Jonah responds by saying that not only has his personal comfort been compromised but God has done the very thing that Jonah feared: God has relented from punishing Nineveh.

Jonah then explains why he ran away from the task of prophesying: "I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God," he says, "slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). How did Jonah know this? Quite simply, he is quoting from the book of Exodus, Exodus 34:6. His use of that verse to describe God is quite ironic, considering the situation of his own people.

God reveals himself to be a gracious and compassionate God shortly after the Israelites have built a golden calf to worship as we read about it in Exodus 32. God had just made a covenant with his people, and they had promised to dedicate their lives fully to him and to him alone. They had turned their back on that covenant, and God made it clear to Moses that he intended to destroy his people. It is only after the coaxing and pleading from Moses that God finally relents from sending calamity against his people, and when asked why, God replies that he is a gracious and compassionate God and that he does forgive sin. The irony of Jonah's use of this text is that Jonah depended on God's grace and compassion for himself and his people, for Jonah was well aware that worshipping golden calves, as his nation was doing, should invite God's anger. Jonah knew that his survival and the survival of the nation of Israel depended on the fact that God was gracious and compassionate. Jonah's failure was that while he benefitted from God's grace, he did not want to extend that grace to others, particularly his enemies, the Assyrians.

God has the final word in the book of Jonah. He asks why he should not have concern for the city of Nineveh where lived hundreds of thousands of people, among them those who do not know their right hand from their left (children) and many animals. God reveals that although Assyria was the enemy of his people, his preferred course of action was to forgive them when they repented so that they could experience restoration and salvation. God reveals himself to be gracious and compassionate not only to his own people but to the other peoples of the world as well.

And, it is clear, he expects the same from Jonah. Jonah should have responded quickly to God's command to go to Nineveh to announce that God was angry with their sin. He should have hoped that God would be gracious and compassionate to the Assyrians. He should have longed for them to experience forgiveness, but he wanted none of that. All he wanted was for him and his own people to live in the assurance of God's grace and let the rest suffer.

The book of Jonah is not about Jonah and the miraculous salvation of a man as he is swallowed by a whale. It is about Jonah, a small-minded, selfish man who wanted God's grace for himself but didn't want to extend it to others. It serves as a warning to God's people and it serves as a reminder and warning to us. Stories about disobedience and rebellion are interesting stories, but wouldn't it be better if Jonah had done what God asked, done it with joy, and celebrated God's grace? If Jonah had not been disobedient, we might never have heard about him, but sometimes the lack of news is better for everyone by far. Just as our news media outlets would have nothing to talk about if nothing bad was happening in this world,

so the book of Jonah would have not made it into the Bible if Jonah had been obedient. Or, if it had, it would have been a book of rejoicing that others besides the Israelites had responded to God's grace.

Pastor Gary