

Jonah: Meeting the God of Mercy

Part One: Running from God

By Pastor David Fields

“The book of Jonah yields many insights about God’s love for societies and people beyond the community of believers...and about how to be “in mission” in the world despite the subtle and unavoidable power of idolatry in our own lives and hearts. Grasping these insights can make us bridge builders, peacemakers, and agents of reconciliation in the world. Such people are the need of the hour.” – Tim Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*

I. Surprise! (How Jonah Subverts our Expectations)

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” – Jonah 1:1-2

Surprise 1) This story is unlike any other “prophetic book” in the Bible. In all the other prophetic books, God’s word is coming *through* the prophet. But Jonah, as we’ll see, this is a story *about a prophet*.

Surprise 2) The readers of this book would recognize Jonah as being, what we might call today an intensely patriotic, highly partisan nationalist, who seems to unflinchingly support the most immoral, awful king of his day. Jonah is not a *good guy*.

Surprise 3) That God would choose to send a missionary to *these* people – the Assyrians. These are the most brutal super-power in the ancient world. Jonah is sent *to a non-Israelite* people group. No other Old Testament prophets were sent *to* non-Israelites.

³ 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.”

Surprise 4) Jonah is the only prophet in the Old Testament who just...runs.

II. Running from the God Jonah Doesn’t Want

We all have a propensity to imagine that God is a lot like, well “me” – likes the things I like, sees things my way.

The Bible calls this act of creating our own ‘god’ idolatry. So, Jonah, he claims to worship the One True God of Israel, and yet when he encounters God as he is, the God who is merciful and compassionate, he despises him.

“But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, “Come on, LORD! Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I

fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. ³At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.” ⁴The LORD responded, “Is your anger a good thing?” - Jonah 4:1-4

“Jonah: a subversive story about a rebellious prophet who hates God for loving his enemies.”

– Tim Mackie, *The Bible Project*

The issue is not that Jonah feels angry; but about *why* he is angry: **Jonah is angry that God is merciful to his enemies.** He believes God’s people deserve better than to have their God forgive these awful enemies who have caused them so much pain.

The Lord says: “And should I not have concern for this great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?” - Jonah 4:11

The book ends with question mark. We don’t know how Jonah responds to God. That’s very much intentional. This word to Jonah is God’s word to us: “Well, what about you? What do you think of God’s mercy toward your enemies those who have done you harm?”

- Do we want God on God’s own terms – God as God is, not the “god” of our own making?
- Are we running away from God because we’ve chosen that we don’t want to have to change?
- Will we stubbornly demand that God take our side, or will we see that we have been ‘runners’ too – in our own ways, running from what God has asked of us?
- Will we notice the ways that we want a ‘god’ who just affirms us, but doesn’t challenge and change us?

III. The God of Mercy *and* Justice?

“When the real God – not Jonah’s counterfeit – keeps showing up, Jonah is thrown into fury and despair. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the mercy of God with his justice. How, Jonah asks, can God be merciful and forgiving to people who have done such violence and evil? How can God be *both* merciful and just?”

– Tim Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*

Unlike the reluctant, prodigal prophet, who preached to this city against his will, Jesus feely gives up his life to save many.

“He [Jesus] did it [shed his blood] to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as **to be just** and **the one who justifies** those who have faith in Jesus.” – Romans 3:26

Will we truly take up Jesus words to us, by the Spirit's power, to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43)? The book of Jonah brings us face to face with ourselves, but ultimately leads us to Jesus who loves us, melts our hearts, and transforms us.

Two verses from "**What if Jesus?**" by Kristene DiMarco

What if Jesus sees what I miss
And He does not share all my thoughts on politics?
What if His body bridges these chasms
That I have dug out in my own self-righteousness?

What if Jesus desires mercy
While I'm busy judging others for their deeds?
'Cause if I have His heart and friendship
Then I must know He loves the liars and the thieves

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions:

Open Up

If you were familiar with the story of Jonah, to some extent, prior to this series beginning, what were some of the main things you bring to the book? Were there any "surprises" from you in this week's Sunday message?

Dig In (some of the following questions are adapted from Eric Mason's study of Jonah)

1. Read **Jonah 1:1-3**. According to verse 2, what purpose did God have for sending Jonah to Nineveh? What does this tell us about God?
2. How does Jonah respond to God's call? What does Jonah's response reveal about the state of his heart?

Ultimately, Jonah's disobedience stemmed from fear, namely, fear that God would relent and allow Nineveh to endure in response to their repentance (4:2).

3. Who are the "unlovable" in our lives?
4. What do we reveal about ourselves when we fail to love the "unlovable" in our lives the way God has loved us?
5. Eric Mason says: "The Church today is known less for what it supports than for what it opposes. Because of that, many see the Church as lacking compassion, even though Jesus demonstrated tremendous compassion throughout His earthly life." As you think about the life of Jesus, what are some examples of His compassion that come to mind?

6. What keeps you from seeing the lost like Jesus?

7. Who is God calling you to show compassion toward today? What is behind your theology that keeps it from becoming faithful obedience?

Pray: Take some time to give thanks to God for his incredible mercy toward us. Ask God to deepen our sense of mercy and compassion toward others – especially those who have hurt us. Pray for the specific needs of your group.