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The book of Jonah begins...

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.”¹ Today’s gonna be a little bit of a history lesson. Sermons differ given the nature of the passage, context, and its listeners. We need to start by doing a bit of background work.

The book may be entitled Jonah, but it’s really about the character of God. Jonah’s story serves as a narrative to enlighten us on who God is; it serves as a picture of his heart and sovereignty over people. It shows us something of his burning holiness, something of his powerful and detailed ordering of events and something of his tender mercy. None of which is stated as cold fact, as if from a theology textbook. Rather God’s image emerges as the story unravels. His character shines through as conversations and events play out before our eyes in comparative relationship to a stubborn prophet.² We’ll find his message not just a call to Nineveh, but also to Israel.

Today, on the western bank of the Tigris River, in northern Iraq, sits the city of Mosul. Across the river on the opposite bank are two mounds. These mounds mark the location of ancient Nineveh. Nineveh was once a great city - capital of Assyria and center of a proud and militaristic empire. Now all that remains are ruins.³ One of the mounds is known as ‘Nebu Yunas’ (mound of Jonah). Some Muslims claim this is Jonah’s grave. ⁴

The book of Jonah is concerned entirely with the prophet’s mission to Nineveh - it was his call to ‘foreign mission’. However, his local mission at home before this, is recounted in a few verses in 2 Kings 14:23–27. It says...

*²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which **he had caused Israel to commit.** ²⁵ He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, ⁱ in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.*

²⁶ The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; ⁱ there was no one to help them. ²⁷ And since the Lord had not said he would

¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Jon 1:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah*. Opening Up Commentary (8). Leominster: Day One Publications.

³ Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah*. Opening Up Commentary (11). Leominster: Day One Publications.

⁴ Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah*. Opening Up Commentary (15). Leominster: Day One Publications.

*blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.*⁵

This one passage in 2 Kings does a few things for us in light of Jonah's story....

Firstly, it fixes Jonah in history, ministering during the long and successful reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel. Which tells us that Jonah was a historical and real figure, not a mythical creation. He lived. He died. And was called to preach the Word of God to both Jew and Gentile, at home and abroad over his lifetime, which he did willingly to Israel, and reluctantly to the Assyrians of Nineveh.

Some critics scoff at the possibility of a man being swallowed by a large fish and surviving. There's a current bias toward the anti-supernatural in scholarship these days by those who might deify human intellect. A bias, which seeks to deny the miraculous. It's damaging. If we cannot believe in the supernatural, we cannot believe in the virgin birth, Christ's resurrection from the dead, or God himself; an idea replete with the notion of the supernatural. We must believe. So please know Scripture can be trusted, although there is mystery we will never fully unravel.

Truth is stranger than fiction. If we spend all our energy on trying to decide if the story is true, we are not spending energy on practicing Truth the story seeks to teach.

Those who deny the supernatural attribute Jonah to be derived from the fable of the deliverance of Andromeda from a sea monster by Perseus [Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2.4, 3]; or from Arion the musician thrown into the sea by sailors, and carried safe to shore on a dolphin [Herodotus, *History*, 1.24]; or from Hercules, who leapt into the jaws of a sea monster, and spent three days in its belly to save the princess, Hesione [Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library*, 4.42; Homer, *The Iliad*, 20.145; 21.442].

Yet in the opposite view, one commentary states, "probably these fables are... corruptions of the sacred narrative, if there be any connection," and that there's a "likelihood of the story of Jonah having passed through the Phoenicians in a corrupted form to Greece," hence creating these stories. Jesus himself referred to Jonah's being in the belly of a fish in Matthew 12, "*A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*⁴⁰ *For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*⁶ Which leads us to conclude, Jesus recognized Jonah as being in the belly of the fish as a "sign." A miracle, mirroring his being in the grave for 3 days. Jesus himself seems to affirm the story of Jonah being called to Nineveh & the events surrounding it.⁷

⁵ *The New International Version*. 2011 (2 Ki 14:23–27). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 12:39–40). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

There's a story which in the past has been used to 'prove', as if we could, that the story of Jonah is real. It goes like this...in 1891 James Bartley served on the whaling ship, Star of the East, and fell overboard during the chase of a whale. He was not found. The next day, the ship harpooned the same whale they had chased when Bartley fell overboard. As they cut up the whale, they notice something moving in the stomach and opened it - out poured the unconscious, but breathing body, of James Bartley. The story goes that he survived and later died in the early 1900's. No one can confirm that story - and there are many reasons to think it's false. The point being that we can run ourselves ragged in intellectual circles trying to prove something, or we can accept the story and what it teaches us. I think it's safe to do so. And if you must know, I do think Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and survived - however that may have happened. I am concerned with what the story teaches us.

Secondly, 2 Kings says another thing to us. The striking feature of his task at the time was the fact that he brought a positive message from the Lord at a time of national idolatry and immorality. Jeroboam had led Israel into sinful and unjust ways which says that one leader can surely effect the whole in positive and negative ways. But God, true to character, overlooks so much of what we say and do. He answers the call of suffering - he shows mercy on Israel although she had been complicit in sin. He used Jonah at the time to proclaim that message to them, a positive message of restoration, not destruction.

Unlike the popular fundamental black & white conception of God in issues of morality, he does operate easily in the very grey areas of life. Although sin deserves death, God cannot condone or be mixed with it - He does understand the complexities which draw people into sinful choices. The personal sinful choices of individuals which may be brought on by the sinful societal systems which they reside under. We are trapped by sin. God understands that. His provision is to allow his own son to become the sacrifice to pay the absolutely necessary penalty for that sin - Jesus crucified should remind us of both God's mercy, but also the great cost of our sin. The penalty for sin is death.

God is judge. It's as if we're standing before his courtroom bench being pronounced the death penalty for our sin. Yet, just as we are to be taken off to the electric chair, Jesus steps up and takes that pronouncement on himself. The penalty of death is satisfied, justice is served, and God the father shows mercy through his own love and sacrifice.

God's understanding of our situation is why God is not a fundy. It's why when we watch Victor Hugo's, *Le Misarables*, and Fantine selling herself into prostitution, which may be considered a black & white sinful act in the mind of a fundamentalist/moralist/textualist (one who knows only the Word but not the Spirit), those who're truly filled with the heart of God can only identify with her in compassionate understanding ways. We know the complexities of corrupt and sinful systems and the narrow choices they leave people. Possibly, God looked down on Israel and saw this & had compassion, although their actions betrayed they weren't following him. God is truly merciful.

He's compassionate and understanding of our weak and frail natures and often times overlooks our shortcomings and shows mercy to free us from the chains we place upon ourselves.

Jonah was directed to prophesy to Israel that the country's borders, which had been eaten away through repeated foreign incursions, would be restored. That is what happened. Jonah's popularity probably rose and soared as the prophecy was fulfilled. He was the popular prophet with a positive message - but now he'll be called to bring their enemies, the Assyrians, a negative message but a chance at redemption which wouldn't have been popular! Unpopular with the Assyrians given its judgment. Unpopular with the Jews because their enemies are being invited into the faith family! In his home mission work, he learned of God's great merciful and compassionate heart - and he knew, as we will see, God would extend that to the people of Nineveh.

The problem was that the Assyrians were the archenemies of Israel, there was no love lost between them. The city of Nineveh itself was great in size, great in power and great in military prowess. There were around five times as many people living there as lived in Jerusalem. A more impressive city couldn't be found. From God's perspective she was also great in wickedness. It was this which came up before God. The God who sees all, hears all and understands all, also smells all. Nineveh stank.⁸

We need a little deodorant too though, don't we? I sat with a woman this week who unloaded her year on me. Firstly, while she was away on vacation, some older kids manipulated her 15 year old daughter to open the house for a party. The woman only found out after someone else shared video clips from Youtube with her of the party which raged in her own home. She saw kids putting cigarettes out on her brand new rugs, passed out in her tub and pouring pickle juice on each other, and a naked man in her own bed. She came home to her house a shambles; holes in the walls and ceilings burns and stains in all the rugs. To rub salt in the wound, the police could do nothing - justice was not on her side. On top of this, in the same year her niece, along with her nieces husband, were killed by the nieces ex-husband in front to of the couples young daughter. There was more she shared, but that's enough to be a dark year!

We have kids shooting kids - and we could round up every firearm in the country and burn them, but it would not solve the problem. It's an issue of a culture with blatant disregard for human life, no sense of morality or ethics, and the damaging effects of loose sexuality. We're plagued with adult adolescence. *Breaking Bad* is a commentary on our being very smart people but with no wisdom and having a twisted morality. Shows like *American Horror Story* with its dark sexuality, torture, and almost total disregard for any decent boundaries reveals our lostness as a society. Reckless spending and debt without regard as to who it hurts in government, business, and in personal life, betrays our indifference to reflecting God's compassionate heart to others. One word sums up American attitudes right now, "Whatever". One phrase sums up our hopelessness, "It is what it is". We've either given up or deified our pet cause and lifted

⁸ Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah*. Opening Up Commentary (18–20). Leominster: Day One Publications.

it over and above God. It's like trying to survive on Coke and candy bars, eventually the body just gives out.

Assyria stank, but we should not too quickly point the finger.

Jonah and all Israel would have been glad if Assyria would just disintegrate. He was not pleased when God commanded him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. They worshiped the vicious god Ashur and a multitude of other gods and goddesses. Their brutality and cruelty was legendary. They were known to impale their enemies on stakes in front of their towns and hang their heads from trees in the king's gardens. They tortured their captives - men, women, and children - hacking off noses, ears, or fingers, gouging out eyes, or tearing off lips and hands. They covered the city wall with the skins of their victims. Rebellious subjects were massacred by the hundreds, sometimes burned at the stake. Their skulls placed in piles by the roadside as a warning to others.⁹

(Indonesia in the 60's killing citizens and dumping them along the road)

In Nahum 3 it says this about Nineveh...

Woe to the city of blood,
full of lies,
full of plunder,
never without victims! ¹⁰

⁴ all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute,
alluring, the mistress of sorceries,
who enslaved nations by her prostitution
and peoples by her witchcraft. ¹¹

¹⁶ You have increased the number of your merchants
till they are more numerous than the stars in the sky,
but like locusts they strip the land
and then fly away. ¹²

Nineveh was the capital of one of the cruelest, vilest, most powerful, and most idolatrous empires in the world. No wonder Nahum called Nineveh "the city of blood" (3:1), a city noted for its "cruelty"! (3:19)

Their leaders were egotistic: "I [am] Ashurbanipal, the great [king], the mighty king, king of the universe, king of Assyria The great gods ... magnified my name; they made my rule powerful" (*ibid.*, 2:323-4). Another, Esarhaddon, was even more boastful. "I am powerful, I am all powerful, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honored, I am

⁹ Clendenen, E. R. (1998). The Minor Prophets. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman concise Bible commentary* (D. S. Dockery, Ed.) (361). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁰ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Na 3:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Na 3:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Na 3:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

magnified, I am without equal among all kings, the chosen one of Asshur, Nabu, and Marduk” (ibid., 2:226).

Gross idolatry was practiced in Nineveh and throughout the Assyrian Empire.¹³ The reaction of the Lord to such wickedness was unwavering. He was *against* it. Nineveh was set against the Lord, whether she realized it or not, and their situation was extremely dire. The Lord was not just against their sin, He was against *them*. It is not a case of ‘hating the sin but loving the sinner’. The Lord was certainly against the wickedness of Nineveh, but he was also against Nineveh herself as the perpetrator of the sin.

That is something we need to hear loud and clear in this modern age - you do not want God set against you. Yes, we preach grace & mercy. Yes we believe God is forgiving & overlooks our shortcomings. Yes, we know Jesus, the lamb of God, was slain for our sin & paid for it. However, when we blatantly and systematically stand against Him in sinful practices, either personally or corporately, we invite his holy wrath against us. God isn’t pleased with my sin, but my sin is not some bastard child which is separate from me. It is intricately tied with my will & choices; I can blame no one else for it. It is the fool who lives the compartmentalized life. Who thinks they can court sin without any consequence, it is not possible. Ralph Venning, a puritan, said sin ‘is against man’s goodness and happiness’ although we do not see it. Maturity owns up to the fact that we are all dark and in need of a savior daily. We need the wisdom & direction of God.

Every preacher feels the hypocrisy of our message when we preach. What we preach against, we live to a greater or less degree ourselves. When we become complacent, we need a wake up call - God is merciful yes, but God is holy. He’s absolutely opposed to & the opposite of sin. He calls his people to be holy as he is holy. **Matthew 5 says** ⁴⁸ **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**¹⁴ **Only possible through the power of the Cross & Holy Spirit.**

His wrath must be poured out on the iniquities of those who’ve set themselves against God - but when we do repent He is compelled by nature & desire to forgive and show mercy. That’s what Jonah doesn’t like - he doesn’t want Nineveh to repent and find mercy. Jonah needs a wake up call to know God doesn’t take sides.

Jonah needs Jesus’ words, ⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor ^z and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. ¹⁵

¹³ Johnson, E. E. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), . *Vol. 1: The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Ed.) (1494). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁴ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 5:48). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 5:43–45). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So in the midst of such darkness God calls Jonah son of Amittai to preach God's words to this wicked place. God wants to immerse himself right in the middle of it and change it. Jonah's name means dove; the symbol of peace. Amittai is *hebrew* for "truth," or "truth-telling"; appropriate for a prophet.¹⁶ God is in essence sending Nineveh a peace offering - a homing pigeon, one that goes out and comes back. A symbol of peace - a symbol of truth sent out to call people home to the true God. God is calling Nineveh to truth, and to himself!

Over the next few weeks I hope we'll see ourselves mirrored in Nineveh, in Israel & in Jonah himself. In doing so, we may see we're a bit dark, that darkness will be contrasted to the light of Christ calling us back to truth.

Jonah was to overflow (fitting after we just finished our Overflow series). It there's hope for Nineveh, there's hope for us. Jonah says life can be better. There's hope for the Lampungese of Indonesia, a people groups of 2.5 million Muslims who have a small percentage of Christians among them. Javanese, Chinese, or Batak Christians who typically write them off as hopeless. The story of Israel and Assyria is mirrored in the Christian Muslim experience of Indonesia. Christians have had their family members raped or murdered and their churches burnt down. Still though, God calls the Christian to love their Muslim neighbor, even their sworn enemy. Even those they feel it is hopeless to love!

November 3rd is the national day of prayer for the persecuted church. Let's pray that the global church can love her enemies and answer the call in obedience to take Jesus to all people groups of the world (Matthew 24:14, 28:19-20)

¹⁶ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Jon 1:1). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.