
The missionary God...and you

an exposure of hearts for the advancement of the gospel

The book of Jonah

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Introduction

What would keep us from becoming an outward-looking, outward-moving community of Christ Jesus? This running question leads us through this month's emphasis on evangelism and missions. The series before us on Sunday nights is titled *An outward focused life*. What we are asking the LORD to do through this series is to give us help and hope as we think about how to strengthen our outreach efforts to the neighborhoods and to the nations.

Last week one of our missionary's (Dave Smallman) challenged us from John 4. He urged us to share Christ with those who don't know Christ. His contention was: if we are born again, if we are enjoying the privileges and power of a forgiven life, if we have tasted to see that the LORD is good, then we will both have and use a testimony. Dave made clear from John 4 that this testimony is nothing less than living a representative life that represents a specific message about a specific person; the good news of Jesus Christ.

In light of his message, how would you begin answer our leading question: What would keep us from becoming an outward-looking / outward-moving community of Christ Jesus?

Now this week we want to continue in our study on an outreach focused life by looking at the book of Jonah. What we will notice is that the Word of the LORD will not return void. It will move out to the nations and accomplish what it sets out to do. Victory in salvation is sure because God in salvation is sovereign. The book of Jonah bears this out well.

God as a missionary is unstoppable! His purpose to the ends of the earth will be fulfilled. The book of Jonah demonstrates that God's precepts carry God's power to accomplish God's purpose. This statement is true but there is something missing. What do you suppose it is? What phrase is missing from the sentence on the screen that would make it more complete and thus correct? How does the Word get out to the world? What divine means has God ordained for evangelism and missions to be successful? Here is how Jesus put it in John 17 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me **THROUGH THEIR WORD**".

To restate the principle with the God-ordained means in place we could say: *God's precepts carry God's power to accomplish God's purpose THROUGH GOD'S PEOPLE*. It is this last phrase that points us toward the purpose of the book.

The Purpose: To recapture God's prophet (people) to advance God's mission.

The purpose of the book was to recapture God's prophet (and God's people; Israel) and bring them back to one of the primary reasons for their election; namely that they were to reveal the light of God's mercy to the nations. The book does this by exposing a false notion that the gospel had man-made limitations. There seemed to be this nationalistic zeal that made the LORD exclusive property of Israel. Their outlook sounded something like this: "We are unwilling to except who God really is; namely a universally gracious God. We want God for ourselves; to hell with the nations". Even though their forefathers passed down the promise that the LORD's grace would make them into a great nation so that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth (cf. Gen.12:1-3) they thought about Yahweh as their own personal god. Sharing with their enemies would be a threat. Caring for their enemies would not be necessary. They were living in the 8th century B.C., a time when the Israelites experienced an increase in societal prosperity but a decrease in personal fidelity. They had forgotten that as chosen people one of the reasons for their election was the great commission.

The Point: Be like our missionary God who is empathetic; not like the prophet Jonah who was apathetic.

Well if that is the purpose of the book what's the point of the book?

[Due to the fact that the book of Jonah contains amazing scenes some dismiss it as fiction. However, the writer or composer of 2 Kings identifies the main character of Jonah as a historical figure living during the reign of Jeroboam II (around 750 B.C.). And Jesus himself reading the book of Jonah considered Jonah as a historical person (cf. Matt.12:39ff).]

What we have here in the book of Jonah is history told to make a point. The point can be seen clearly when we understand that the message of the book is not found in the prophet's preaching (as is usually the case). Rather the focus of the book is on the prophet himself. As we pay attention to how the writer characterizes Jonah we will begin to understand what we are to make of the story. Furthermore, when we identify that the main character is not Jonah but the LORD (who in 48 short verses he is talked about 38 times) we begin to see a stunning contrast. As the book unfolds, it uncovers two hearts; 1) a Jonah-like heart whose characteristics need to be abhorred and 2) the LORD's heart whose characteristics need to be adored.

Thus the message for the Israelites in the days of Jeroboam (750 B.C.), the message for the Israelites in the days after the awful exile (400 B.C.), the message for the church of Jesus Christ (2006 AD) is life-changing. Be like the missionary God who is empathetic (kindhearted, caring, compassionate, merciful) ; not like the prophet Jonah who was apathetic (heartless, uncaring, unconcerned, merciless).

For each of us to undergo repentance and to embrace this charge we must come face to face with the two hearts portrayed in the book of Jonah. Notice these two hearts as I read chapter one.

God's patience with Jonah

1:1-17

Now the Word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea and there was a mighty tempest on the sea so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the Captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise; call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us that we may not perish. And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land". Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done?" (For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.) Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us?" (For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.) He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you". Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land but they could not for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you O LORD have done as it pleased you." So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

In Jonah's disobedience

vv.1-3

The Lord's patience with Jonah is made clear as we notice first Jonah's disobedience found in vv.1-3. The story begins with Jonah commissioned by the LORD to go to Nineveh; a place of terrifying enemies of the Israelites. These first three verses tell us that he is fleeing two things. In the first part of verse three we see Jonah fleeing the LORD's commission. He wants no part of obeying the LORD's will. The second thing we see Jonah fleeing is found in the latter part of verse three. Jonah flees the company of the LORD. He wants to depart not only from the LORD's commission but now we see him wanting to flee from his presence.

This is how the story starts. The LORD demonstrates his desire for the nations. And Jonah demonstrates his desire to disobey. Nevertheless, the Lord patiently goes after Jonah as we see in vv.4-17.

In Jonah's discrepancy

vv.4-17

The contrast between Jonah and the LORD continue as we observe vv.4-17. The LORD could have left Jonah to himself and allowed him to live a rebellious life. He could have left him to himself and allowed him to go in the opposite direction of obedience. Instead, we see in v.4 the LORD recapturing him by controlling the weather and making it impossible for him to run away.

Here is the LORD's heart. The LORD is patient with runaways.

In contrast, notice Jonah and his inconsistency. All through chapter one Jonah looks out of step. When everyone else is awake he sleeps (v.5). When pagans are crying out to their gods he remains silent to his God (v.5). When pagans are urgent and concerned he appears indifferent and apathetic (vv.6-10) When he identifies himself to the pagans one is tempted to laugh. He says he believes that God made the sea. And yet we see him attempting to flee on the sea. We hear that he fears the LORD. But we see that it is the pagans who eventually fear the LORD (v.16). We notice that the pagans want to live and the prophet desires to die (v.11-13).

Throughout chapter one the narrator wants his readers to see Jonah's disobedience and discrepancy on the backdrop of the LORD's amazing patience. Notice how the chapter ends. The LORD not only appointed a great storm to stop the errant prophet. He now appoints a great fish to save him from death.

Oh, the LORD's patience with his wayward people.

God's pity toward Jonah

2:1-10

And not only do we notice God's patience but we begin to see His pity. Follow along as I read chapter two.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and our billows passed over me. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me, weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit; O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away I remembered the LORD and my prayer came to you into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD. And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

In Jonah's suspicious contrition

vv.1-7

Having just witnessed a shocking picture of the heart of a prophet in chapter one, we come to the poetry of chapter two. Poetry sings. Poetry is beautiful. Poetry is an attractive use of language. And yet something is not right. The one who is retelling the story

has characterized Jonah in chapter one as untrue. And so, when we hear his contrition found in vv.1-7 we are to be a bit suspicious.

The suspicion increases as we think about what he said. For example, in verse 3 Jonah attributes his life-threatening situation to the LORD's doing. "You cast me into the deep". I suppose one could say that ultimately the LORD did through his providence cast him into the sea. But 1:12 clearly shows Jonah behind his awful situation. The consequences of his behavior are owing to him...not the LORD!

Also our suspicion increases as we read on and come to Jonah's assessment of why he is away from the presence of the LORD. In chapter one it was made clear that Jonah desired to flee from the presence of the LORD. Now in this questionable contrition he says that it was the LORD who drove him away from his presence. I'm beginning to wonder about this "song of thanksgiving". I'm becoming unsure as to why Jonah's contrition in vv.5-7 has him looking so virtuous. Could it be that the writer wants us to see another aspect of Jonah's heart and abhor what we see?

In Jonah's sickening confession

vv.8-10

Making our way down through the poem we come to Jonah's confession.. In v.8 we come to good theology. "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope in steadfast love". That is right. That is good counsel. And we use this statement in counseling sessions. But when we reach verse 9, we find Jonah thinking that he is the opposite of verse 8. "But I" sounds so self-righteous as if verse eight didn't apply to him. The irony of this confession is that we do see this application in chapter one but it is not with Jonah. We see the sailors doing this in 1:16 offering sacrifice and making vows to the LORD.

This contrition and this confession, according to verse 10, were nauseating. The fish vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. The LORD was behind the fish's aim. He pointed the fish toward dry land to save Jonah and put him back in the mission we read about in chapter one.

What is being exposed thus far are two hearts. Jonah's wish and the LORD's will. Jonah demonstrates disobedience. The LORD demonstrates patience. Jonah says one thing but does another. The LORD has pity upon such a pathetic prophet.

The contrasts are to be working on our hearts. Can you see any traces of Jonah-likeness in your hearts? Do you believe that the LORD treats you not as your sins deserve. He is patient and demonstrates pity for those who are out of step, who are rebellious, whose self-righteousness is sickening. Oh, that the kindness of the LORD will lead his people into repentance.

God's power through Jonah

3:1-10

The story takes a turn and now we see clearly what the book is all about. Follow along as I read chapter three.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you. So Jonah arose and went

to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!". And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

In Jonah's unconcerned preaching

vv.1-4

We witness clearly the power of the LORD to change the hearts of ruthless people. This scene is one of the most impressive revivals in the whole Bible. And the LORD's power is magnified for our viewing as it is seen in contrast with Jonah's unconcerned preaching.

Are vv.1-4 here to communicate that Jonah repented and now is obeying the commission set out in 1:1? Or are we to see further how deplorable Jonah's heart was and how amazingly gracious and compassionate the LORD is?

Two observations lead me to believe that Jonah is not to be viewed as honorable. First, we notice that the commission has three commands. 1) Arise 2) Go 3) say. In chapter one, we see Jonah arising but not going or saying. In chapter three we see Jonah arising, going but what about the third aspect of the commission. The writer of the story wants us to wonder whether or not he preached the way and the message that the Lord wanted.

We are left with the impression that Jonah at best preached in an unconcerned way (This interpretation bodes well when we get to chapter four and notice more of Jonah's heart).

In Jonah's unbelievable achievement

vv.5- 10

Why is chapter three here? Verses 5-10 answer the question. Revival breaks out among some of the most ruthless and barbaric people known in Jonah's day. This chapter is to make clear something of the LORD. His passion to make His name known by reaching the world through his people is clear. Ps.66:4 says, "All the earth shall worship you and shall sing unto you; they shall sing to your name" In Isaiah God's people coming back from exile were exhorted by these prophetic words: "I will send survivors to the nations...that have not heard my fame or seen my glory and they shall declare my glory among the nations" (cf. Isa.66:19).

The LORD's mission to make His name known to His adversaries (Isa.66:1-2) is victorious! Nothing can stop His Word (Isa.55:10f). He will reach the ends of the earth with His blessings in order that His glory will fill the whole earth (cf. Hab.2:14). And he does this through his chosen people. This is why the LORD hasn't given up on Jonah (or us).

This is why chapter four is written. God's has a purpose still for Jonah. He has a purpose for each of you. Let's listen in on the LORD's ministry to Jonah as I read chapter four.

God's purpose for Jonah

4:1-11

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my lie from me, for it is better for me to die than to live". And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live". But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die". And the LORD said, "You pity the plant for which you did not labor nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

As He listens & talks to Jonah

vv.1-4

God's purpose for Jonah comes full circle as we notice how He reaches out to him. To recapture the heart of his messenger, notice with me how Lord ministers to Jonah. First in vv.1-4 we see him listening and talking to him.

For the second time in this story we hear Jonah praying. The first prayer came from a heart that was dubious. This prayer comes from a heart that is despicable. His motive for fleeing back in chapter one comes out. He knows what type of God Yahweh is. And therefore, he does not want to see his enemies enjoy the LORD's grace. He wants to die. He is angry. And in verse 4, we see him not answering the LORD again. He walks away. But don't miss the LORD in this sad scene. The LORD pursues. The LORD engages. The LORD listens. It is obvious that the LORD has not given up on Jonah. Here we see the LORD beginning to draw his messenger back to Himself.

As he blesses & blisters Jonah

vv.5-8

Next we see the LORD's heart by noticing how he reaches out to the pouting prophet. In vv.5-8 we are told of how the LORD got Jonah's attention. Once again we see Jonah abandoning his ministry and leaving town. He sits on the east side of the city with hopes of witnessing wrath and not blessings for his enemies. Isn't it ironic that the Lord's preacher of His Word is used to bring blessings to the nations but misses out on the blessings himself?

Instead of abandoning his messenger, the LORD comforts him first by providing shade. But the LORD's comfort is not design to be an end in and of itself. When Jonah enjoyed creaturely comforts more than winning the lost the LORD appointed scorching heat. As He blesses and blisters Jonah He now has his attention to make the point of the entire story. This is found in vv.9-11

As he teaches Jonah

vv.9-11

The Lord's purpose for Jonah is the same purpose for us. I suppose one could say that Jonah did the will of the Lord in chapter three but not from his heart. Now we see in chapter four how the Lord requires the heart in mission. Isn't it ironic that Jonah could be used by the LORD to bring salvation to so many and yet not love them in the ministry? The LORD teaches that to be on board with the LORD's great commission one's heart needs to reflect the LORD's heart.

Vv.10-11 make this point clear. Jonah had pity for a plant that would perish but he did not have pity for people who would perish unless they turn to the LORD. The Lord had pity and spared Nineveh. But in order to do so He could not spare His own Son.

Can you see Jesus? The One who was swallowed up not by a fish but by condemnation for the sins of his people. He was 3 days and 3 nights not in the belly of a fish but in a grave. He came forth not grudgingly but gloriously. He goes forth into the nations with God's Word not selfishly but lovingly. And He carries out this mission through His church whose hearts are recaptured by His love.

The LORD left Jonah and leaves us with a question. "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 children and many cattle too?"

To end a book with a question is an unusual way to end. Maybe the point is to say that the LORD always gets the first and last word in. I think it is a bit more than that though. Questions have a way of searching the heart. Leaving us with questions might be a good way of drawing us into His missionary heart. In conclusion here are some questions to leave you with; questions that I hope reflect the intent of v.11.

- Do we desire private comforts more than pagan conversions?
- Do we enjoy getting but not giving blessings?
- Do we see the two hearts found in the book of Jonah?
- Are we beginning to recall that to spare us He did not spare his own Son?
- Do we believe with God that people without Christ perish for all eternity?
- Are we (re)recruited to the Great Commission by His grace?