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A BIG FISH STORY

The Book of Jonah

One Main Thing

Stories of grace do not always appear as a "Vision of Grace" when you are living in the story. In fact, most of the time, grace sneaks up when you aren't expecting it.

Introduction

Jonah is a fascinating book. It is like no other book in the entire Bible. Usually, we think of it as a kids' story, but Jonah is not just a Bible story for children. It is funny how certain things get relegated to being for kids. We think of "Jesus Loves Me" as being just for kids. How do we get stuck in those ruts of thought? Jesus really does love us, and the Bible really does tell us so. We probably should spend more time thinking about just how much he really does love us and how the Bible really does tell us so rather than just dismissing it as for children.

Likewise, the book of Jonah has often been thought of as just a kids' story so we rarely study it in-depth. Usually we only look at Jonah 1-3 because those chapters fit in the kids' story concept, and we disregard chapter 4 because it is just way too deep for most kids and probably for a lot of adults.

In Chapter 1, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was an ancient city located in Assyria (modern-day Iraq), and it is commonly thought that, at one time, it was the largest city in the world. Assyria was a longtime enemy of Israel, earning it several negative mentions in the Old Testament. A prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, which tells us the time period Jonah lived (mid-eighth century BC) and that he was a northerner, from the Israelite town of Gath-hepher. (Assyria destroyed Jonah's country, and maybe his hometown, in 722 BC.) The passage in 2 Kings also shows us that God, ironically, uses an evil king and Jonah to help to save some Israelites that had been subjugated and were being bitterly oppressed.

Going Deeper

In Chapter 1, Jonah runs from God's command. He is told to go, yet he flees in the opposite direction to the end of the known world. Jonah boards a ship to Tarshish, and God sends a storm to bring him back. The sailors do everything they can to save Jonah, but eventually are reluctantly convinced to throw him overboard at his

own urging. When the storm immediately ceases, the sailors know it was an act of God, and they start to worship and make vows to the Lord. At the very end of the chapter, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish that God has prepared to receive him.

In Chapter 2, Jonah's circumstances help him decide to have a little talk with God. I am sure everyone has had that experience, maybe not from the belly of a fish, but when we feel that everything is not going to be okay, we tend to start looking for him; so does Jonah. It is from the belly of the fish that Jonah prays, and God hears him. God saves him by having the fish spit him out on the land.

In Chapter 3, the word of the Lord again comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah, possibly wiser, but no softer and no less stubborn, obeys. In 3:4, we have the entire recorded text of Jonah's sermon: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" It's not a beautiful oration on the love of God calling them to repentance. Jonah is the worst preacher ever! His sermon is eight words long, and he wanted his listeners to not respond. Yet, everyone in Nineveh does. Some may try to use this as an argument for shorter sermons because his eight-word sermon actually worked! The King orders everyone to repent. The King is hopeful that God will show them mercy, and he does; God does not destroy Nineveh.

This is where we typically end the story. We tell the story of Jonah, but we leave off the rest because it is odd and doesn't fit our neat outline of the book.

Jonah ran

- *from* God in chapter 1,
- *to* God in chapter 2, and
- *with* God in Chapter 3.

The first three chapters of Jonah are so fanciful some people have trouble accepting them; but to me, the really odd part of Jonah comes in the last chapter. Jonah is furious that God does not destroy Nineveh. He is so furious, in fact, that he again prays to God. But this time, instead of asking for God to save him, he prays that God will kill him! Then Jonah tells us why he ran away in the first place. What would send a man scurrying away from the command of the almighty God? Jonah knew God is just too nice and loving, and he knew that God would relent from his anger if the people repented.

Jonah hopes that God will repent from his kindness and destroy the city anyway. He goes up on a hill to watch to see what will happen. God makes a vine that shades Jonah, and Jonah is really happy about his little shading plant. The next day, God has a worm kill the plant and then, like at the beginning, He sends a wind. This time it is a harsh, hot, east wind. Jonah is so angry that when God asks him about the plant, Jonah says he is mad enough to die over it. This is a powerful object lesson for us and for Jonah who is acting like a horrible

child. God asks Jonah: "If you want to save a plant that you didn't make and only lasted a day, then why can't I want to save a city with 120,000 little children and numerous animals." Yes, God cares for the babies and even for the cattle of Nineveh. What an amazing comparison between the love of God and the lack of it from Jonah. Jonah, the man of God, is the villain in the story and yet, amazingly, God still loves him, too.

Application

Jonah is a book of opposites. Everyone in the story is a stereotype, and every stereotype does the exact opposite of what one might think they would. Jonah, the prophet, disobeys, rebels and hates. The pagan sailors aren't hardened pirate-like killers; they are kind and concerned about a stranger and about maintaining their own innocence. The Ninevite king isn't cruel and blasphemous; he is humble and repentant. One might expect that he would have tried to have Jonah killed or expelled from the city, yet he heeds Jonah's miserable message. The sea and the storm are not indiscriminate killers; the fish, the worm, and the vine are not just nature-taking-its-course but are instead obedient servants of God. And perhaps most surprisingly to us, but not to Jonah, God is not the vengeance-hungry being that we expect. He is kind and merciful, overly so, to Jonah's way of thinking.

We truncate the last chapter of Jonah's story, but when we do, we are truncating the best part of God and

Jonah's story. We are cutting off a display of amazing grace! The grace that saved the sailors, that saved Jonah, and that saved all of Nineveh! God cares for the people, the pagan sailors, the babies, and even the animals! God even cares for the rebellious, disobedient Jonah.

It is shocking that the man of God's faults are so blatant and exposed. We usually try to hide our faults, as though we would be better than Jonah, as though we do not ever harbor ill will, as though we truly care for people, as though we truly want our enemies to repent rather than to be destroyed by God's wrath. We want to hide that part of our lives just like we want to avoid the fourth chapter of Jonah. What Jonah needed is exactly what we need: God's grace! We, Jonah, Nineveh, and the sailors all need the same thing: more of God's amazing grace.

Conclusion

In Matthew 12:41, Jesus says, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." God wants us to repent and be saved, and he sent Jesus to preach to us. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

God wants us to be saved. He wants the entire world to be saved, and he uses everything he has to make

that happen. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16–17). Jesus really does love us, and the Bible really does tell us so.

That's the story of Jonah. God uses everything at his disposal to save people. He used a storm to save the sailors, and a fish and a worm to save Jonah. Shockingly, he was able to use a miserably flawed Jonah to save Nineveh, and more shockingly, he used the death of his son to save us.

Discussion

1. Jonah ends with a question. What is the answer, and why is not included in the book?
2. Jesus compares himself to Jonah. What similarities and dissimilarities do you see in Jesus and Jonah? And who they preach to? (Matthew 12:41)
3. Peter's father's name is often translated as John. Why would Jesus call Peter "The son of Jonah?" (Matthew 16:17, John 1:42 What correlations in the lives and personalities of Jonah and Peter do you see? John 21:15-17)
4. Where can you see grace in the story of Jonah?
5. Compare Jonah's grace with God' grace. Which are we more like?

6. Can you see a comparison between the book of Jonah and the full story of the prodigal son?