



WHO IS GOD, ANYWAY?

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Book of Jonah
Eighth Message
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The story of Jonah is a whimsical, somewhat fantastic tale, one that has worked its way into the cultural fabric even of modern times. Jonah is a favorite of Sunday School classes because of the vivid images of the action. There are several clear lessons to be learned from this book—lessons about the importance of obeying God and of his wonderful grace and mercy, not to mention the swallowing of a man whole and alive!

But Jonah is not at all like the other Minor Prophets we have been studying this summer. The book doesn't appear to be either an oracle from God, or prophecy, but simply the story of a rebellious man who seems always to be on the wrong side of God. And it doesn't seem to be very inspiring, leading some to wonder why it is even in the Bible. I believe, however, that the entire book of Jonah is read in Jewish synagogues on Yom Kippur, their most holy day. Surely there must be something deeply significant in this book. Let's see if we can discover what that is.

I want to look not so much at Jonah's actions, but his words. Rather than focusing on the motivation and negative example of the reluctant prophet, I want to look at the positive elements, the three times when Jonah speaks—Jonah's three Testimonies. I will refer to the story as background, so I'll briefly go over the highlights of the narrative.

Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of the nation of Assyria, and preach a message of coming destruction. The prophet, however, headed in the opposite direction by signing on for an extended cruise to the West, from the city of Joppa. Soon the ship was overtaken by a fierce storm, and it became evident that Jonah was the immediate cause of the storm. After his testimony, and further futile attempts to save the ship, the ship's sailors threw him into the sea. Miraculously, the storm immediately abated; the wind stopped blowing and the sea became calm. At that point Jonah was saved by being swallowed by a big sea creature (variously referred to in the Bible as fish, whale, or sea monster). Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the fish (his second testimony) and was subsequently vomited out on the shore.

God again called Jonah to Nineveh, and this time he went. He preached a short message of calamity against Nineveh, and miraculously, all of Nineveh repented of their evil ways. God was favorably moved by their repentance and decided not to destroy the city. Jonah, however, was incensed by God's mercy, and prayed to die on the spot. Jonah's third testimony is part of his accusation against God. God used the example of a shade plant to try to teach Jonah a lesson in compassion, but by the end of the book, Jonah was still unconvinced and angry. We never learn whether he learned the lesson.

Jonah lived in the north of the nation of Israel at the time of the king Jeroboam II (about 800 BC, shortly after the time of Elisha the prophet). He had had quite a good run of successful prophecy regarding the political and military expansion of Israel under King Jeroboam. Given the proximity of the nation and the prophet to the Assyrian Empire, whose capital was Nineveh, we can surmise that Jonah was quite familiar

with the Assyrians, an extremely wicked people who tortured their captives and practiced genocide. The Assyrians at times have been referred to as the Nazis of the Ancient Near East.

Jonah's words in this little book are literally and theologically true, even though his actions and attitudes are mostly rebellious and ungodly. It would appear that a true prophet is unable to speak falsehood. Balaam, for example, was willing to take money to curse the Israelites of Moses' day, but could not do so; blessings came out of his mouth instead. Jonah's words are not merely true, however; these three testimonies form a core of truth which pervades all of scripture. Moreover, the message both spoken by Jonah and lived by him in spite of himself, points directly at our Lord Jesus.

Let's look now at Jonah's first testimony, his witness of Jehovah God. To get the immediate context, we will look at the scene on the ship in the midst of a "great storm." Chapter 1, beginning with verse 4:

And the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, "How is that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish." And each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" [In short, they asked, "Who are you, anyway?" Now listen to Jonah, verse 9:] **And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:4-9, NASB)**

Jonah didn't answer all of their questions; or at least his responses are not recorded. I like the answer that he gave, though. In reply to the question, "From what people are you?" Jonah identifies himself with Jehovah God, and identifies his God as the one God who made everything.

The intensity of the response to Jonah's witness has fascinated me for some time. Verse 10:

Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. (1:10)

What I find remarkable is that although these men were pagans, having their own pagan gods, after Jonah's very brief testimony of a Creator God, Jehovah, they instantly recognize God (as Creator, at least) and fear him. They are genuinely shocked that a man would do what Jonah had done. Of course, mentioning that his God had made the very sea that

was now threatening to kill them had a very immediate and profound impact on them. These men were changed by Jonah's message. Their intentions were changed, and although they eventually threw Jonah into the sea, with reluctance and fear, they ended by worshipping Jonah's God, Jehovah. Jonah made a brief yet wonderfully true statement that changed these men's lives: that Jehovah God was the Creator of all things.

This scene teaches us the importance of identifying God with his creative acts. In the Bible, God identifies himself in this way, most spectacularly at the end of the book of Job. Job 37-41 gives God's perspective on his creativity and connection with the natural world. Listen to a few phrases that he addresses to Job:

**"Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
Or loose the cords of Orion?
Can you lead forth a constellation in its season,
And guide the Bear with her satellites?
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens,
Or fix their rule over the earth?
Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
So that an abundance of water may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings that they may go
And say to you "Here we are'?" (Job 38:31-35)**

Here is how Isaiah describes who God is:

**"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span of a hand,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance,
And the hills in a pair of scales?" (Isa 40:12)**

Less than a month ago, my wife Nancy and I spent two and a half weeks in the Rocky Mountains, including Teton and Glacier National Parks. Those mountains are magnificent and awe-inspiring, but when Isaiah speaks of God's majesty, God is seen to be far greater—and able to handle those huge mountains as if they were so much dirt.

The Bible begins and ends with creation. So I think of creation as the *book covers* of the Bible. But creation fills the pages between as well, as we see in the verses I just read. Furthermore, God is still in the business of creation. Dave Roper says, "It took God to make a man, and it still does." Of course, Dave isn't referring only to making a man from the dust of the earth or knitting him together in his mother's womb. He is referring to the making of a mature man, as the New English Bible translates Ephesians 4:13: "So shall we all at last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God—to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ." God's creativity is never ending, as you can probably attest from your own life. And of all the ways that we are made in the image of God, I think we value creativity the most.

Before we leave this first testimony, I'd like to point out a parallel between the account of Jonah in the storm and that of Jesus with the disciples in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, described in Mark 4:34-39. Jesus was also asleep, even as the storm was raging. He was also awakened by the others, and challenged or even rebuked for sleeping when all were in peril. Jesus too spoke just a few words. And in both cases the results were the same—a perfectly calm sea. I certainly don't mean to imply that Jonah calmed the sea in the way that Jesus did; only that as a result of Jonah's words and actions, he was thrown into the sea, at which point God brought about a complete calm. So we might say, in a figurative sense, that Jonah

calmed the sea. He did, after all, tell the sailors that the sea would become calm if they threw him in. And the responses of the others on board the vessels were the same in both cases: fear of the power and presence of God. Clearly, all present recognized that only God can control the storm. Jonah's shipmates were moved to worship this God who saved their lives; and Jesus' disciples were moved to awesome wonder at who he is.

What is the meaning of these words and events to us living at the end of the 20th century? Those sailors discovered that God is both powerful and present. I wonder whether we truly believe that. It seems to me that many of us act as if God is either impotent, uncaring, far away, or all three. However, scripture teaches the opposite. Occasionally God breaks through our unbelief to show us the truth—as in a storm. Although those moments can be terrifying, they are also rich, because they bring us face to face with God. I would challenge us all to remember what scripture says here: that God is present, and that he is perfectly able to deal with every circumstance over which we needlessly worry. We too find ourselves in the storms of life, fearful that our boats will capsize. The storms serve to remind us that our own efforts are totally inadequate, and that we need God to calm the waves. As we mature in faith, we learn that God is not a cosmic genie, ready to do our will at any moment. As Jonah and others have discovered, God is sovereign.

And sometimes the trial seems endless. I'm reminded of a couple who have shared their story with the elders. They are embroiled in a lawsuit that came about from their efforts to do good. Now they are facing a financial and emotional storm that threatens to break up their boat. It's not easy for them to trust God in the midst of the storm, and they have yet to find their way to the safety of the shore. Yet God is worthy of their trust—and ours, too.

When Jonah was thrown into the sea by the fearful sailors, he faced near certain death, sinking he says, "to the roots of the mountains." But no, he was swallowed whole by what the Bible calls a "great fish." Without trying to analyze what sort of creature that might have been, let us admit that Jonah's salvation was completely miraculous. This event is the one fact that nearly everyone knows about Jonah, whether they believe it or not. This is what galvanizes our imagination and fascinates children. And this is the sign to which Jesus refers when he says that no sign will be given other than the sign of Jonah; part of the sign and the miracle is that Jonah survives for three days inside the fish.

Now let's look at Jonah's prayer, in chapter 2. His prayer is a psalm. Its language and content are familiar from several of the psalms, and the language itself is taken from the Psalms. And why should it not be so? Certainly, Jonah, as God's prophet, would have been familiar with the Psalms. Jonah's prayer is a song of thanksgiving for deliverance, even though that deliverance is incomplete and even questionable when he prays. He was still inside the fish, after all. This prayer is a concrete example of giving thanks in all things. Verse 7 says that Jonah remembered the Lord. It appears he did that, just at the last moment, when his situation was hopeless from a worldly perspective. Jonah says that God heard, that he answered, and then in verse 9, Jonah declares: "*Salvation is from the Lord*"—that is, from Jehovah God. The essence of this prayer is that Jonah is thankful, even though he's still in big trouble. Sitting, standing, lying, whatever, in the belly of a sea creature is not exactly salvation. But Jonah gives thanks to God for saving his life, and, because he knows God's character, he is willing to trust in God's deliverance in spite of the

circumstances of the moment.

The word I want to focus on in this message is *salvation*. This is the Hebrew Y'SHUW'AH. This word, meaning "deliverance," "saving," perhaps "victory" (especially in impossible situations), is used seventy-seven times in the Old Testament. For example, after the Red Sea crossing, Moses sang, "The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation" (Exod 15:2). Hannah was barren, but God gave her a baby in response to her fervent prayer. Listen to her song of praise: "My heart exults in the Lord; My horn is exalted in the Lord, My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, Because I rejoice in Thy salvation" (1 Sam 2:1). And in 1 Samuel 19:5, the writer says of David, "For he took his life in his hand and struck the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great deliverance for all Israel." (Here the word "deliverance" is the same y'shuw'ah as that usually translated as salvation.)

Salvation from God is the theme of the Bible. We can see that in the above passages. Salvation from God through Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the central message of the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus' very name is essentially Jonah's testimony, "Salvation is from Jehovah."

The story of Jonah turns on this word, for the prophet became God's instrument for the salvation of Nineveh. His figurative death and resurrection for the sake of Gentile Nineveh prefigure Jesus' literal death and resurrection for all Gentiles, indeed for everyone. Jesus testified to this truth (in Matthew 12:39-41): "for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." So Jonah's story became Jesus' story, changed and magnified and glorified.

Both Jesus and Jonah were given up to death to accomplish God's work. But Jonah "died" (so to speak) on account of his own sin, whereas Jesus died for the sin of all men. Jonah deserved his sentence, but Jesus was innocent of all wrongdoing. So in fact, Jonah is not a type of Christ, but an anti-type. Jonah "died," not for Nineveh, but to escape from participating in God's plan of salvation. By contrast, Jesus our Savior died of his own free will, intending to save us. Nevertheless, Jonah's story is a sign of Jesus' coming death and resurrection, and of his work of salvation for all.

How do you suppose the twelve disciples felt as Jesus spoke those words of the sign of Jonah? Don't you think that they then (at least then) recalled the story of Jonah sleeping in the ship, and remembered when Jesus slept in the back of their little boat on the Sea of Galilee and then calmed the storm? I think that the parallels of those incidents served to authenticate Jesus as the one who would, like Jonah, not only die and rise again, but also bring salvation. In other words, since he had already replayed the role of Jonah sleeping and calming the storm (again, figuratively speaking), his word of fulfillment of the very next act in Jonah's life could be trusted all the more.

Very few of us have had the experience of coming close to death by drowning. And none of us have found ourselves in the dark, wet, slimy, smelly, and probably dangerous, belly of a large sea creature. But many of us have faced situations in which we felt as though we were drowning, and many will face such circumstances in the future. Where do we turn at those times? Oh, we say that we trust in God in all circumstances. But do we? Do we have the confidence that Jonah had when he remembered God, or when he thanked God

from the belly of the fish? Are we ready to praise God when we're still in the middle of the mess? How can we ever learn how trustworthy God is unless we have to trust him in an impossible situation? We are called to step out in faith, regardless of the circumstances. Sometimes we need to take a step without seeing any sign of support. In the Indiana Jones movie, the hero has to take a step out over a terrifying chasm. Only when he takes the step does a platform extend out to support him and prevent his certain death. Sometimes we're called upon to show up without being able to see the end result, like Jonah or Jesus' disciples.

Nancy and I learned to trust God in our storm many years ago, when we faced a child custody lawsuit from my ex-wife. It seemed so clear to us that my two children should be with us, in a stable home and learning to know the Lord Jesus; but there was a very real chance that a judge in another state, with no knowledge of us, would listen to the appeal of their mother for permanent custody. The state supreme court there had already overruled another judge's order to return our children to us until the custody case was heard. Everything was going wrong. The legal costs were horrendous. Our hearts were breaking. At times I felt as though I was drowning. But we went to our knees in prayer. We learned there not only to trust God, but to know him. We discovered in the weeks and months of praying and anguished waiting that God was there, that his people were there for us, and that he would be there for us and for our children, regardless of the outcome of the custody hearing. What lessons! There is no other way to learn.

I think we often have the incorrect view of God that when times are good, he is blessing us, and when times are bad, he is punishing us. That's the view articulated thoroughly by Job's friends. But at the end of that book, God declares that he is sovereign and has the right to do whatever he wishes, because he is the Creator. In the New Testament, we are given additional insight into God's purposes in our lives. Peter says in his first letter that "even gold passes through the assayer's fire, and more precious than perishable gold is faith which has stood the test. These trials come so that your faith may prove itself worthy of all praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7, NEB). So we see that these trials are part of God's eternal purpose for our lives. But, in order to trust God, we must believe that he is good. This is what Jonah testifies in chapter 4, verse 2.

In the intervening time, Jonah was saved; then he brought a message, not of salvation, but of destruction to the Ninevites. Their response was overwhelming. Every person believed the word of the Lord as proclaimed by Jonah, and everyone repented. I'm struck by the results. Jonah had a 100% conversion record, including the sailors he witnessed to. He did have a pretty impressive story to tell the Ninevites, and his appearance probably backed up his story. But 100%—that's quite a success. God was moved by their repentance, and in his goodness, decided not to bring destruction on the city.

But that mercy he showed to Nineveh was not what Jonah wanted. In fact, it made him angry. He complained to God:

"Please O Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall it I fled to Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."
(4:2)

This testimony is taken directly from Exodus 34:6-8; however, there is more in Exodus. There is a "but" in Exodus 34:7:

“but one who punishes sons and grandsons to the third and fourth generation for the iniquity of their fathers!” Now if any fathers did iniquity, it was the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh. Of all people, they were the most wicked, and the most likely to deserve God’s curses instead of his blessings. Jehovah God is a God of justice, but the Bible teaches that his mercy is an even stronger quality. For example, Psalm 86:5 assures us, saying to God, “For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to *all* who call upon Thee.”

‘Lovingkindness’ is that little word *hesed* (loyal love) which we hear so much in the Old Testament. We see now, though, that *hesed* means more than that. God had made no covenant with the Assyrians, no commitment to them to be loyal or loving. But out of his goodness comes his *hesed*, his lovingkindness, his wonderful love and compassion.

Jonah’s view of God, then, is scriptural and accurate. But he didn’t want God to be gracious and compassionate to Nineveh! He wanted God to destroy the place—and, from a worldly perspective, with good reason. In less than a hundred years, the Assyrians would defeat Israel, and carry most of them off to captivity. Did Jonah know that? As a prophet to Israel, he might have. Certainly, he would have known that Nineveh and the Assyrians represented a threat to Israel; and as a good, loyal citizen he wanted nothing to do with saving Nineveh. Twenty-eight centuries later, it has been easy to criticize Jonah for his lack of compassion, but consider the following scenario. Supposing you were a Jew living in Poland about the year 1900. God gave you a message of destruction to give to Berlin, Germany. But you, as a godly Jew, knew of God’s mercy and lovingkindness. And as a prophet, you knew what was coming—or at least had a fuzzy vision of the next forty years of some of the horrors of Nazi Germany. What would your response be? In that modern context, we might be more sympathetic to the dilemma facing Jonah. At the same time we see a little clearer the enormity of God’s mercy.

God has a further course of instruction for Jonah. However, we will continue to look at Jonah’s testimony of God’s goodness: of his grace and love, of his loyal love. The Old Testament teaches God’s goodness not only in words, but by his merciful and gracious actions. In spite of the rebellious and unloving response of his people Israel, he time and again responded to their cries for help with deliverance, a miracle, or a savior. His forbearance and gracious provision for them in the desert for forty years; his raising up of judges in the time after they came into the land of Canaan; his giving them his anointed king, David, all show God’s tender father’s heart and his loyal love.

God’s goodness is fully revealed in the person and work of his Son, Jesus. When Jesus announced his ministry, he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives, And recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). What can be better for us who were entangled in sin—like the woman caught in adultery—than to be set free? Then, blinded to truth and living in darkness, now Jesus brings us light and sight, every bit as much as he did literally to the blind men he healed. He has promised us release from oppression and to give us a spiritual life of abundance. No one is or was better than our Lord Jesus, who showed us in his person what it means to be good, and in the

process, what it means that God is good.

God’s goodness wasn’t limited to showing us a bit of himself, and it isn’t limited to loyal love and deliverance to us today. He sent Jesus to the cross, showing in the most dramatic and loving act of all, his loyal love for us, who, like the Ninevites, do not deserve it. Because of that act, we will have an eternity to thank him, to be with him, and to live in incomprehensible joy. Jonah testifies to God’s character, and ultimately to the character of our Lord Jesus.

Jonah preached a message of doom—the destruction of Nineveh—but the Ninevites turned from evil and believed in Jehovah God. Jesus preached a message of reconciliation and life, but many find it difficult to believe him and accept God’s love. Remember that he spoke of the rejection that he faced, and that the men of Nineveh would call to account those who rejected him. Will you be one of those judged by the Ninevites on the last day? Are you more proud of your abilities than they? Or do you think you are too wicked to be saved by God’s mercy and grace? I assure you, you are not more so than were those ancient Assyrians, nor probably more so than the man or woman sitting next to you.

Jonah’s testimonies reveal the essence of God’s word to us: the book covers of creation, the theme of salvation, and his character of goodness and loyal love.

Consider again God’s creation. John 1:4 says, “All that came to be was alive with His life, and that life was the light of men.” God made us to be his children, living a life of joy because of his presence. Consider the salvation that is there for you. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent His son into the world, but that through Him, the world might be saved” (John 3:16-17). The salvation that he offers is not just deliverance in the present crisis, but forever. And he does love you. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says: “I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sit down to eat with him and he with me.” His invitation is gracious and loving. He is not offering an impersonal religion, but an ongoing, eternal relationship. The Creator, saving, loving God wants you to accept him today. Turn to him in response to his love and sacrifice for you. He loves you more than any earthly father. He asks only that you believe with a faith the size of a mustard seed. He promises to do the rest.

If you have not yet asked Jesus into your life and soul, I ask that you would pray now with me.

Dear Lord God, I confess that I am a sinner, that I am wicked, and undeserving of your mercy. I believe that Jesus your Son died on the cross for my sins, and I pray that you would accept that sacrifice for me as you have promised. I promise to follow Jesus where he leads me, trusting in you to provide the resources I desperately need to do so. Thank you, Father, for your acceptance of these new believers, for your gracious words to us, and for your answers to our prayers. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

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