

Reflections on the Book of Jonah
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The book of Jonah covers only four chapters. It is a well-known book, even to little children who refer to Jonah and the whale (although a big fish was mentioned instead of a whale). Jonah has been considered by some to be an allegory or a parable or a fiction with a lesson; there are many however who look at this book as a historical narrative, especially since Jonah was referred to as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25 and the Lord Jesus used the book to teach about His death and resurrection in Matthew 12:39-41.

The book begins with God calling Jonah to pronounce judgement on the city of Nineveh. Jonah was probably the only prophet called to prophesy to a foreign gentile city; the rest recorded were told to prophesy to the people of Israel. What is unique about the prophet Jonah was that he refused this call from God and 'fled' from Him in the opposite direction, away from Nineveh.

We are familiar with what follow: Briefly, Jonah fleeing in a ship encountered a storm and his attempt to escape God eventually ended with him being swallowed by a big fish; God rescued him and there was the record of Jonah's thankful response with the fish vomiting him onto dry land. Jonah was given a second call by God and his preaching created an unexpected 'repentance' in the city of Nineveh. Jonah was however angry with the result and he continued to brood and complain against God. The book ended with a dialogue between God and Jonah.

Jonah has been described as a disobedient and rebellious prophet by some, as one who is a negative example of a missionary, someone not to emulate, even as someone who was an ungodly servant of God. There may be some reasons for various ones to come to these conclusions but do these accurately describe who Jonah was and why he 'fled' from God? There are those who branded Jonah as a racist, a nationalistic Jew who did not want anything 'good' to occur in the city of an enemy of Israel, particularly when the Assyrians were well known for their atrocities in war and Jonah was probably aware from the prophecies of Nahum that Assyria would one day destroy the northern state of Israel. There are probably some elements of truth in all these conclusions but what is it that God wants His people to learn from this book; what are the main significant lessons for us to take home from this book of Jonah?

In the book of Job, the question raised was "Why did God allow bad things to happen to good people?" In psalm 73, the question implicitly asked was why the wicked seemed to prosper and God apparently allowed good things to happen to bad people. In the book of Jonah, the prophet, in his anger, remarked, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2,3). What Jonah said revealed that he was one who knew God and the character of God; he was complaining that God, being so gracious, compassionate and loving, would not carry out judgement against the evil city of Nineveh should the people of the city respond even a little positively to his prophecy. Jonah was in fact asking God the question, "Why are you so gracious and merciful to a people who are evil, merciless, and do not deserve any ounce of grace and mercy?"

Interestingly, Jonah did not complain when God was gracious and merciful to him despite his disobedience and after God delivered him from death when he was swallowed by a big fish. Similarly, when Jonah was sitting and awaiting judgement to fall on Nineveh, God provided him a plant (gourd) to shelter him but subsequently caused a worm to destroy the plant. Jonah was angry when this happened and he behaved as one who deserved to have this plant for a shelter even though he did not cause the plant to grow in the first place.

Jonah did not complain when God was merciful and gracious to him; his objection was that God should not be gracious and merciful to those who do not deserve it and in fact should destroy them.

Underlying all these is Jonah's wanting a God of his own making and understanding; he was stipulating that God should behave in a way he thinks God should. At the root of it, Jonah does not understand the true meaning of God's grace and love, and His sovereignty.

The prophet Habakkuk also had issue with why God should use the evil nation of Babylon to punish His people Israel but his conclusion was to accept the sovereignty of God and to rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in Him even though he could not fully appreciate why God would do such a thing. In that light, Habakkuk acknowledged that God is sovereign and he should not question the goodness, wisdom and love of God.

Jonah needed to learn that God has the right to be gracious and compassionate to whoever He chooses, even to those who seem incorrigible and hopeless. The Lord God pointed out to Jonah that he could feel sorry for a plant that grew overnight and then was gone, then he should not be angry if God were to show love and compassion to so many living beings and animals in the city of Nineveh.

We must notice the contrast that the gentile city of Nineveh responded to the cry of impending judgement from a Jewish prophet whilst Israel refused to repent even though God sent prophet after prophet until God's patience came to an end. Israel thought she was special to a point that God would never punish her and destroy Jerusalem where the temple of God resided. In the same manner, the church of God may be similarly presumptuous and feel that her situation is secure because she belongs to God's people and so behave in a way that puts God's name and glory to shame. Israel was reminded in the Old Testament that God chose her not because she deserved it or merited it but simply because God is love and gracious.

We must appreciate God's grace and love for what they are. God's grace towards us means that we receive His grace not because we deserve it, but grace in fact implies unmerited favour. Jonah mistakenly concluded that he and Israel merited God's mercy and love because they were a chosen people given the Torah and the land whereas the gentiles, especially those who were wicked, did not. The message of the cross and the gospel similarly is resented by the natural man; he rejects that he is a sinner and he is as bad as the worst of man, without any hope for salvation and that even his very best efforts to be right with God would not do. To add to this, to be told that he simply has to come to God, repent and accept God's grace and love without any merit on his part is repulsive. For the Christians and believers, we easily forget that we also came to God by grace and that we need His grace and His mercy continually to progress in our Christian lives. Having received His love and grace, we must learn to be gracious and loving to others, even those deemed by others as beyond hope and incorrigible. Only then can we claim to truly understand God's sovereignty, grace and love and realise that there is no ground for us to cry out "unfair", for grace means that there is not even an iota of merit on our part, so where is there the right to question whether God is fair or unfair. Incidentally, the book of Jonah actually focuses on God; He is the one who brought out a storm to prevent Jonah from fleeing; He is the One who caused the mariners to recognise to some degree who He is; He is the one who commanded the big fish to swallow Jonah and later vomit him out; He is the one who caused the plant (gourd) to grow and 'die' overnight and He is the one who was

sovereign over Israel, the gentiles and even Assyria. God allowed Assyria to continue and later act as His instrument to punish Israel. After using wicked nations, including Babylon, to punish His people, He subsequently dealt with these nations for their cruelty and arrogance.

We cannot afford to be like Jonah in choosing what we want God to behave like and certainly, as people of grace and mercy from God, we have no right to be angry with God, just like the clay cannot question the potter why he was moulded the way he was (Romans 9:19-23). Like Habakkuk, let us humbly acknowledge His sovereignty and rejoice in the God of our salvation with much gratefulness and thanksgiving.