

Introduction to Jonah

Chapter 1

Luke 15:1-24

Matthew 18:1-14

Responsive Psalm 139:7-14

So, I am not entirely sure what happened, but somewhere along the lines I got my wires all crossed. My intention starting into this study of the Minor Prophets was to take them in Chronological order, but as we were going through Obadiah it became apparent that well...we were indeed not in order. So I am not sure exactly what happened there, somewhere along the lines I got the idea that Obadiah was first, when really it is more toward the middle and actually Jonah should have been first. So, just look at it this way...like those movies that show the ending first and then build out the story that's kinda what I did unintentionally. So this morning we are going to be starting out in the book of Jonah, a story that we are all very familiar with especially if you grew up in the church you have been hearing this story since childhood, but unlike then, as we go through it we are looking to answer those 2 questions I set up a few weeks ago beginning this study, what does this teach us about Christ, and what does this teach us about ourselves? And it is through that lens that we will be looking at this book.

Before we start getting into the text itself to give us a better understanding of what was going on in that time, I like to again go through and look at the history, the events, and the things of that time as it helps to flesh out the people, and the story. It is believed that this story had taken place somewhere around 798-753 BC, as it is mentioned in the text that it is during the reign of King Jeroboam in Israel. This was a time of great prosperity for Israel, as under Jeroboams reign Israel had successfully reclaimed her lost territories and had amassed great wealth. This was a very prosperous time for her, where on the other hand, in Nineva where most of this story takes place there were famines, droughts and troubles. The timing of this is during the early rise of the Assyrian Empire. A pagan kingdom who was known throughout the ancient world for its military, and brutal handling of its prisoners. During those years though, the Assyrian Empire was going through their own struggles, being struck with plagues, famines, and widespread unrest within their own borders dealing with rebellions among the people.

To top it all off, in about the middle of this time period, in 763 BC there is recorded a total solar eclipse which swept all across the entire middle east, this event can be found recorded in the ancient Assyrian records. This would have been seen as a bad omen to the pagan Assyrians, believing the eclipse is a sign of divine wrath and judgment. With the combination of the plagues, the famines, the uprisings, and now this believed sign the people of Assyria probably believed the end of the world was coming, that their destruction was coming. This creates a unique and prime time for the gospel message of hope and restoration as everything anyone believes upon is crumbling around them, their strength, their power, their pride is all falling apart into fear and doubt the gospel message which Jonah was to bring to the people of Nineveh would have probably been exciting news, as they believed their god's where going to judge them, and destroy them, but to learn that the God of Israel is offering them peace would likely have been a relief to the people.

So, this is the backdrop that we see during this time period, Israel is prospering, she is wealthy, and at relative peace, where Nineveh, in the Assyrian Empire would have been going through a rough time. So even looking at this from a pragmatic point of view, The God of Israel has blessed them, the

the believed god's of Assyria were cursing them, it would make sense that they would have a unique openness to listen to a prophet of Israel, though they were enemies.

And this is where Jonah comes in, God calls him to be his messenger to the people of Nineveh, but what does Jonah do? As we are all familiar with the story, he attempts to go in the opposite direction. Let us go ahead and read this morning, starting in verse 1-16. This account wastes no time In jumping right in, we see that the Lord commands Jonah, to go to Nineveh, and to call out against it because God sees the evil, and has chosen to offer them repentance. Nineveh was an old city, it is mentioned in the book of Genesis, and at this point would be a city with a very large population which would go on to become the capital of Assyria. God sent Jonah, as his messenger to call them to repentance from their evil, I am sure Jonah, along with any Israelite was fully aware of the evils of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire for not only where they pagan idol worshipers, they were a brutal and cruel people. The Assyrian King Ashurnasirpall II who reigned about a century before this account of Jonah boasted that after he had defeated a city, killing 3000 men that he captured many of the soldiers alive, with those soldiers whom he captured, he cut off their arms and hands, cut of the noses, and ears, and gouged out the eyes of many the captured soldiers. He bragged about making a pile of the living, and a pile of heads and hanging their heads on trees around the city.

Though this was 100 years or so before this account, it is widely known the brutality and sinfulness of the Assyrian Empire, and the people. This sort of paints a picture as to why Jonah was reluctant to follow God's command, Jonah didn't believe that the people of Nineveh should be given an opportunity to repent, he believed they should suffer punishment and judgment for their brutality, and sinful pagan ways. Yet, what this story shows is that God delights in showing his mercy and grace to undeserving people. And it shows a sad picture of us, as God's people, and his messengers as we may unjustly judge others whom God may have called. There is a lot of irony in this book of Jonah, Jonah and Israelite, a prophet of God who claims to fear the Lord, is at times less reverent, and religious then those Pagans of whom he is to minister to. In these first 16 verses in this account of him attempting to flee by boat, this Israelite prophet, disobeys the Lord, while the pagan sailors fear the Lord greatly. One has to ask the question, who does Jonah think he is that he can argue against God? These pagans believing in false Gods are struck by fear in the power of the God of Israel, yet Jonah, says...nah, I don't think those people should deserve redemption, and attempts to flee and go in the opposite direction.

No fear of disobedience, no fear or respect for God, whom he knows, and believes, and for Jonah this is a lesson in God's sovereignty, for there is no thwarting God's purpose and plan, God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh to deliver and message of repentance, and to Nineveh Jonah will go, either by the easy path, or the hard path, but either way he will go. Jonah chose the hard path, he chose to rebel against God's command, he decided he knew what was better, he decided that he believed Nineveh should get what they deserve, and not be given redemption. We also see the arrogance and pride of Israel here, the hard line between their beliefs of what makes them God's special people, and the pagans on the outside, with no understanding that it is all God, and that God can, and will, choose the very people we believe are unsaveable. All of this shows God's mighty power, his sovereign power, and his mighty grace and mercy as he chooses to save those who are worthy of destruction. This is likewise a lesson for us, we are to be ministers of this gospel message of hope, and be little concerned as to who hears it. By that I mean, this is a message for everyone, and there is no one single person who is to sinful, or to far gone that God can not save. We have throughout the old testament, accounts like these, of God chosen to bring in outsiders, Israel didn't have a hold of God's redemption, God offers it to whomever he wills, though Israel was representatives of God, and are called the people of God, often

times we see more repentance, and reverence among the pagan converts than the so called people of God, just like with Jonah here, and the sailors.

After seeing the power of God, and his judgment against his own, and the ineffectiveness of their own pagan Gods for deliverance as the waves crashed upon the boat threatening to sink the ship, the moment they threw Jonah over the side, the sea calmed. They were witness to God's judgment and power to effect even the sea. At that moment, there was more reverence and respect for God, than Jonah himself had. Verse 16 says "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows." They were afraid that they would be held accountable for murder throwing Jonah overboard, they were afraid that if they didn't, they would die. They recognized God's power and judgment, and his sovereignty over even the sea, as they acknowledge this in verse 14 when they cry out to God and say, "Do not charge us with innocent blood, for you O Lord, have done as it pleased you." I find it interesting to see more faithfulness in these pagans, than in the very prophet of God.

We would like to think as we read stories like this that we would be better, telling ourselves how in the world could Jonah outright disobey such a clear and open command of God? Who did he think he was, that he could escape that calling, that he could hide from God. Yet, we do it too. My Jonah moment was my attitude toward taking on this role of preaching, and my belly of the whale experience was 10 days in the hospital. God taught me humility, and trust, and acceptance into this ministry that he had prepared for me. So, we look at Jonah and think, I would never do that...yet, we all would I think in our own ways.

As followers of Christ, we fail in even the simplicity of following Christ. If it was not for his sustaining mercy, and his unending forgiveness toward us none of us would yet be here today. God showed Jonah great mercy, he could have let him drown in that sea, and would have been justified in that punishment for Jonah's rebellion, for thinking that he knew better than God, for believing that Nineveh was beyond salvation and should not be given the chance to repent. Yet, God spared him for there is no thwarting the mission that God has set aside for you, no matter how much you run, or hide from it if God calls, you will complete it, it's just whether or not you have to go through the belly of a whale, to learn to put aside your own rebellion and unfaithfulness. It would seem that these sailors became believers, even in Jonah trying to skirt away from the ministry God had for him, the events around his own rebellion brought about the saving grace to a handful of pagan sailors.

When we were going through the book of Ruth, we talked about the lengths that God will go to rescue his children from their sin, a famine drove Elimelech and his family to Moab, where Ruth married one of their sons, and in the end becomes a beacon of faithfulness, and humility in the Bible as she, a gentile outsider is brought in to the people of God. God used Jonah's rebellion to show his power to these sailors, to show these men that he alone is the one true God, who controls the wind and the waves. We can't know for sure if their reaction was only out of fear, or if they truly did turn to following God, but the mention of sacrifices and vows makes it seem that they did. I think we can take great comfort from such accounts, knowing that no one is unreachable by God. He actively, and effectively seeks out his children, and he uses what to us may look like hardship and bad situations and brings it around for his glory. It took a famine to bring salvation to Ruth, and it took a rebelling prophet and a storm to bring salvation to these sailors, God literally effects the weather, the harvest, the seasons to effectually call his people. What a great and mighty God we have, who will not let one of his sheep be lost, who will move the world to bring them in.

This is an encouragement to us as ministers of this gospel message of hope. It is not on us to convince or convert, it is God who does those things, we are to merely be faithful in the sharing of the gospel, and God will move mountains to gather to himself his one lost sheep, as we saw in the parables we read this morning.

No one is hopeless, no one is beyond God's reach, and if God so wills it, his children will be called, they will follow him, and they will be saved there is no question about it. But we don't know who God's chosen people are, we don't know how God chooses to use circumstances in our own lives, or the lives of others in his own salvific work. We just live each moment as it is before us, and we are called to be faithful in those moments, to be faithful stewards of the gospel message, to share, and encourage and to call sinners to repentance by it..and it is God who works in the hearts of mankind making them able to see, hear and believe. But just like how God used a famine in the case of Ruth, or a rebellious prophet and a storm to reach these sailors, we also don't know what one must go through before they are humbled before God and will hear...but God knows, and just like those examples, he is in control of each and every one of those situations. Look at verse 7 the sailors say, "Come, let us cast lots that we may know for whose cause this trouble as come upon us." So, they cast lots, and it fell on Jonah." They essentially rolled the dice, and used the dice to determine the fate of one individual. Something that would seem random happenstance to us, was all a part of God's purpose and plan, even the outcome of the so called random casting of lots brought about God's purpose.

God is the good shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, and he uses hardships and difficulties to drive us all to a place where we can do nothing else but to rely and trust in him. For Jonah, it was a reminder of who God is, and that he is completely in control and that his rebellion would not go unanswered. So, to it is with us, this storm not only struck fear in the sailors, it also reminded Jonah of God's sovereign power as we see in Jonah's response in verse 9. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and dry land." Sometimes we need a reminder of who God is, because we are dense human beings with short memories and attention spans. When all things are going well, we seem to rest in those moments but when troubles arise, we run to God. These moments for a believer are reminders of God's control, and his provision for us. He provides the times to rest that we often take for granted, and he allows the trials which draw us closer to him.

Next week as we get into chapter 2 we will see the effect of God's use of trials and hardships. Jonah began this story high and mighty, thinking he knew better than God, thinking that the people of Nineveh were not worthy of redemption but rather judgment and destruction...and God humbled him, in the belly of the well he cries out for salvation. And the reality is here we all have the potential to be a Jonah, to take things for granted, to brag or think more highly of ourselves, then God uses something, or someone, or event to humble us causing us to come back down, realize our error, and trust him. In the christian faith, there is the idea of that hardship equals punishment, you suffer because you did something wrong, you are suffering because God is punishing you. Though, at times that may very well be the case, it is not every time as some would like to say it is. Sometimes suffering comes to draw us closer to God, sometimes suffering comes to cause us to grow in our faith, it is not a punishment, but a tool that God uses to draw us closer and closer to him. Just as Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians, talking about this vary thing...trials from God, and their purpose. He wrote, in chapter 12:7 "Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me; a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with

the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me “MY grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake, For when I am weak, he is strong.”

God has thrown Jonah's understanding upside down here, there is more faith in the pagans than in the prophet, more faith in the gentiles than in the Hebrew. IT is the Israelite who in this case is the wicked sinner, while those who would have been believed were most deserving of God's wrath are shown mercy and spared. This is showing Jonah that it is God who punishes sin, and it is God who decides who is rescued, the lesson that Jonah needed to learn. One commentator mentioned that this account is to show you that the people of God can act just as sinfully as anyone else, and are just as deserving of judgment yet, we are reminded that the God whom we serve delights in showing his mercy, and has in fact called his people to this purpose, to bring his blessing to the world.

It is not our place to question who God calls, or when he calls, or who he places before us to minister to, we are to simply minister the gospel, and remain faithful, trusting in him, believing upon him, and resting in him.