The Book of Jonah: More Than a Fish Story

by David Roper

Of all the books of the Bible, the hardest names for most people to learn are those of the minor prophets. Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah are hardly names one encounters every day. But one minor prophet everyone knows. Even people who know nothing about the Bible will admit, “Oh yes, I’ve heard the story about Jonah and the whale.”

Our lesson is on the book of Jonah. It is a small book, with only four chapters. The classic outline of the book uses the word “run.” In chapter 1, Jonah runs away from God—in disobedience. In chapter 2, Jonah runs to God—in prayer. In chapter 3, Jonah runs with God—in obedience. In chapter 4, Jonah runs ahead of God—as he tries to tell God what to do. But the approach I want to take with the book is that it is “more than a fish story.”

Some folks think that it is a “fish story” in the sense that it never happened. You may not believe this, but up (down, over, or whatever) in (name of neighboring state or whatever), some fishermen stretch the truth—stretch it so much that it is no longer recognizable! Even so, some say that the story of Jonah is “just a fish story,” that it really did not happen. Some believe maybe it is an allegory to teach some truth, but there never was an actual Jonah who was swallowed by an actual fish.

But it really did happen. The book of Jonah was inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16, 17); you can trust it. In 2 Kings 14:23-25, Jonah is identified as an actual historical character, a prophet who worked in the northern kingdom of Israel following the work of Elijah and Elisha there. In the New Testament, Jesus puts His seal of approval on the story in Matthew 12:38-41.

Of course, it is the part about the big fish swallowing Jonah that some have problems with. “A whale couldn’t swallow a man,” some say. “Its throat isn’t big enough.” In the first place, the text does not say it was a whale. In the book of Jonah, the phrase used is “a great fish.” In the New Testament, even though many translations use the word “whale” in Matthew 12 and cross-references, the original text has “sea monster,” in other words, a monstrous sea creature. Interestingly enough, there are accounts of big fish (some of them in the whale family) swallowing men and animals. (Some of those swallowed have been rescued alive—in bad shape, but alive.)

But, in the second place, we are not talking about an ordinary sea creature anyway. The text says, “God . . . prepared a great fish” (Jonah 1:17; emphasis mine). If man can prepare “a great fish” (that we call a submarine) to swallow hundreds of men and keep them alive for weeks, why should we be surprised that God can prepare a great fish to swallow one man and keep him alive for three days?

What I really want to talk about is the fact that many think the book of Jonah is just “a fish story,” in other words, that that is what it is all about. But the book is not a story about a great fish, a great storm, gourds, or worms. It is a story about a man’s relationship with his God. That is what I hope to get across when I say that it is “more than a fish story.”

Open your Bible to the book of Jonah, and I will show you what I mean.

A STORY ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISOBEDIENCE (Jonah 1)
The story begins with Jonah getting his “Great Commission”:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness
Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. It was one of the oldest, largest, and strongest cities of that day. It is estimated that it had a population of at least 600,000 in the days of Jonah. It had been founded by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11). It was a “garden city,” a beautiful place—but it was full of idolatry and wickedness.

God says to Jonah, “Go preach to these wicked people.” God was (and is) interested in the lost, anywhere (2 Peter 3:9). We would have expected God’s prophet to have said, “Yes, Sir!” and to have quickly gone to do the will of God—but instead we read:

Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord (1:3).

Nineveh was northeast of Israel. Tarshish was far to the west. It was probably in what is now called Spain; it was the farthest most trading post of the Phoenicians—about two thousand miles from Nineveh! That is Jonah’s destination as he attempts to flee “from the presence of the Lord” (as though God were a regional God!). So he goes down to the sea coast town of Joppa. It was not uncommon to wait weeks for a ship going to where one wanted to go, but amazingly there was a ship going to Tarshish. If one wants to go away from God, the devil will always have a ship ready and waiting! Jonah paid the fare and got on board; what the full fare would be, however, he did not yet realize.

The question always comes, “Why didn’t Jonah obey God; why didn’t he go to Nineveh?” Much speculation has taken place, and many answers have been given. Some say Jonah was afraid to go to Nineveh—but a man that can sleep through a storm does not sound much like a coward. Others say that Jonah’s pride was involved; he was afraid that God might change His mind and that would make Jonah appear foolish. But surely a prophet of God (under normal circumstances) would want his listeners to respond to his message so that they would be saved. The best answer is that found in the book itself, in 4:2 after God had spared the Ninevites. Jonah says,

O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

In other words, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he did not want the people in Nineveh to repent and be spared. He wanted the full measure of God’s wrath to fall upon them! To understand this, you have to know something about the relationship between the Assyrians and the Israelites—and something about the nature of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were a cruel and vicious people. They were brutal in warfare and barbaric in the slaughter of their captives. They had a mania for blood and vengeance. In every city they conquered, the Assyrians built a pyramid of human skulls. That was the grisly calling card they left behind. Jonah believed that a people like that did not deserve God’s mercy; they needed to be totally annihilated!

Regardless of Jonah’s motivations for heading to Tarshish, it was not long before he found out that a person cannot get away from God. Some years earlier, the Psalmist had made this point in Psalm 139 in these words addressed to God:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139:7-9, emphasis mine).

So a terrible storm arises. The original text says that “the Lord hurled a great wind into the sea” (1:4). Even seasoned sailors were afraid (1:5). They began to cry to their gods; in the midst of that awful storm, there was not an atheist on board. They began to take extreme measures, tossing overboard the cargo on which their livelihood depended. And where was Jonah while all this was happening? Our text says, “Jonah . . . was fast asleep” (1:5); fast asleep while the ship was about to go down, fast asleep while 600,000 people in Nineveh were about to perish!

They woke Jonah up (1:6) and then cast lots to find out if anyone present is responsible for their awful plight and “the lot fell upon Jonah” (1:7). They ask him some questions (1:8), and
from his answers (1:9), they deduce that he has angered his God:

Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why has thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them (1:10).

Ever since that time, anyone who brings disaster upon a venture has been called a “Jonah.” The word “Jonah” actually means “dove,” the symbol of peace. No doubt he was named that by a loving mother, who, many years before, had looked down upon his small sweet face and said, “This is my little dove.” She must have thought of him as a bringer of peace and tranquility. Instead he brought a storm—and danger to all who were near him!

The sailors cry out, “What shall we do?” (1:11). Jonah says, “Cast me into the sea” (1:12). But they were reluctant to do that to a fellow human being, so they tried to make it to shore—to no avail (1:13). So they cried to the Lord not to punish them for what they were about to do (1:14), and they cast Jonah into the sea. Immediately, the sea became calm (1:15), and the sailors offered a sacrifice to the Lord” (1:16). At last we come to the verse we have been anticipating:

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights (1:17).

We are talking about the consequences of disobeying God. Because Jonah disobeyed God, he failed to help others, he endangered the lives of many, and he ended up inside a fish!

Isn’t it amazing how simple, how crisp and clear, the biblical description of that ordeal is? “And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” Since I want you to see the consequences of sin, I would like for you to take a moment to just try to imagine what a harrowing experience that would have been. Here is one speaker’s attempt to picture what it was like:

If you use your imagination to recreate the scene, it will terrify you. Pitch black. Sloshing gastric juices wash over you, burning skin, eyes, throat, nostrils. Oxygen is scarce and each frantic gulp of air is saturated with salt water. The rancid smell of digested food causes you to throw up repeatedly until you have only dry heaves left. Everything you touch has the slimy feel of the mucous membrane that lines the stomach. You feel claustrophobic. With every turn and dive of the great fish, you slip and slide in the cesspool of digestive fluid. There are no footholds. No blankets to keep you warm from the cold, clammy depths of the sea.

Disobedience always ends in disaster—now or later!

So many applications come to mind. God gives us our orders. When he does, there are two directions we can go: to the Nineveh of obedience or the Tarshish of disobedience. Often, like Jonah, we head the wrong direction. We may not flee from the presence of God outwardly—we do not leave town or the country—but in our hearts, we do. Maybe we even begin to neglect those things that remind us of God’s presence: the Bible, prayer, Bible classes, public worship, association with Christian friends. As it was with Jonah, this is a sure formula for disaster. You cannot flee from God without paying the cost, without suffering the consequences!

Surely the most obvious application has to do with the Commission the Lord gives us. He tells us that we are the earthen vessels to whom the gospel treasure has been entrusted (2 Corinthians 4:7). He tells us to go to the lost, and that if we do not, they will be destroyed eternally (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16). But like Jonah, we do not go.

Most of us would not have the audacity of Jonah, who said, in effect, that he did not go because he wanted the Ninevites to be lost. Surely none of us would be so hardhearted as to say concerning lost souls, “I hope they go to hell.” Apparently, our problem is that we are just not sufficiently concerned about the lost around us. Many are heading to eternal destruction and it does not seem to move us. In the end, it is a difference with no difference, for the bottom line is the same: God said, “Go,” and we do not go. Oh, Jonah had his “reasons” for not going—and so do we . . . but not a single “reason” can cancel the fact that we are not doing what God said to do!

Again I say that the consequences of disobedience can be disastrous—to those we should be reaching and, as in the case of Jonah, to ourselves.

A STORY ABOUT PRAYER AND RESTORATION (Jonah 2)

Chapter 2 is an amazing chapter. Most of it
is the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish. I do not know what kind of prayer Jonah was before he was swallowed by that finny creature, but he is really fervent and eloquent now. Trouble has a way of sharpening your praying skills.

Among other things, the prayer lets us know that Jonah was not swallowed by the great fish immediately, but rather that he sank into the sea, all the way to the bottom, before the fish gulped him down. Verses 3, 5 and 6 tell us about that horrifying descent:

The floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. . . . The depths closed me round about, the weeds [seaweeds] were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottom of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever.

In this terrible situation, Jonah remembers God. He says:

When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple (2:7).

And he makes this promise:

I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord (2:9).

In other words, “If You’ll just get me out of this, I’ll be Your prophet and go where You want me to go and preach what You want me to preach, just as I vowed I would long ago.” Is it not amazing that he pleads for the one thing he was not willing to extend to the Ninevites—the mercy of God?

Then we come to the second verse we have been anticipating:

And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land (2:10).

Again, to appreciate the scene, use your imagination. Imagine that you are walking along the beach when, to your surprise, a monstrous fish rises up out of the water near the shore, It opens its mouth, and out floods this great smelly mass onto the beach. Then, to your surprise, a form rises up out of that nauseating heap; it is the form of a man. Then the most surprising thing of all: The man scrapes the corruption off his face, lifts his hands to heaven, and thanks God for deliverance! Yes, when Jonah repented, the Lord forgave him—and delivered him.

Another of the minor prophets spoke also of the graciousness of God:

Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil (Joel 2:12, 13).

“Evil” here refers to punishment, and “repent” means “to change the mind.” But God’s change of mind is dependent upon man’s change of mind. If men will change their mind about sin and turn to God in penitence, then God will change His mind about punishing them—for God is a merciful and gracious God.

The next chapter begins, “And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time” (3:1; emphasis mine). How marvelous it is to realize that our God is the God of the second chance! No matter how far away we have strayed, no matter how deep we have sunk in sin, if only our hearts can be broken, He will give us a second chance when we come to Him in His way (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16)!

A STORY ABOUT THE POWER OF THE WORD—AND THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GOD (Jonah 3)

The final thoughts of chapter 2 introduce us to chapter 3, which tells about one of the greatest revivals in the history of the world—not in Jerusalem or in Nashville or in (the closest area where the church is strong) but in a pagan city 150 miles northwest of Bagdad.

It begins by God repeating His instructions (3:1, 2). Now Jonah is obedient: “So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh according to the word of the Lord” (3:3a). It would have been at least five hundred miles to Nineveh, but I imagine Jonah made it in record time.

When he reached his destination, he started through the city. Verse 3 says, “Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days journey.” This probably means that it took three days to walk across it. The walls of the city were only eight or nine miles apart, but the city had a great many suburbs (Genesis 10:11).

So Jonah started, preaching God’s message—one man in this huge city, the Sodom of his day!
And his message has only seven words: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (3:4). He must have sounded like a broken record. When he came to a beggar in the street, he said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” He came to a merchant going to his stall and he said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” At last he reached the palace and he shouted up, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Is it possible that such a simple message could have any effect?! Most of us would probably have been very skeptical. “It won’t do any good to preach. People won’t listen. They are interested in other things. They are steeped in sin. Their hearts are hardened.” What we forget is that if the message is God’s message, it has power. Verses 5 through 9 testify to that power:

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For words came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth [that was a rough cloth used to make sacks, like our burlap], and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God [among Persian people, it was the custom for even domestic animals to join in the signs of repentance; this was their way of saying that all they had was the Lord’s]: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

What a lesson there is here for us! How easy it is to become discouraged regarding teaching God’s Word, to feel that no one is interested, to feel that it will do no good. But let us never give up proclaiming the message. The world may become more and more corrupt; the church may be plagued with more and more problems; our task is to preach the word with faithfulness “in season, out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). For God’s word has power (Romans 1:16; Hebrews 4:12)!

When the people responded to Jonah’s preaching, we again see God’s graciousness:

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil [punishment] that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not (3:10).

The Ninevites received “a death-row reprieve.” How great is God’s mercy toward those who turn to Him!

A STORY ABOUT MISPLACED VALUES AND GOD’S BROKEN HEART (Jonah 4)

When the story of Jonah is told in children’s Bible classes, often the teacher only goes through chapter 3; that closes the story on a very positive note. But God really has not come to the punch line yet. Everything has been leading up to chapter 4—which declares that the book of Jonah is not just “a fish story”, but is a story about misplaced values . . . and God’s broken heart.

It is not often that you hear of a preacher who is upset because people responded to his preaching, but Jonah is. “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry” (4:1). He tells the Lord why he did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place (4:2), and then says, “Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live” (4:3). I doubt seriously that he really wanted to die (when he was near death in the belly of the fish, he had pled for deliverance), but he is upset. God speaks to him kindly to try to make him think (4:4).

Jonah then goes up on the side of the hill to watch and see what will happen next. He makes a booth to sit under—a framework made of branches (4:5). And God, who prepared a fish, now prepares a gourd (4:6), and it grows up over the frame and shades Jonah. Verse 6 says, “So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd”, the original text has he “rejoiced with great joy.” Is it not interesting that this is the first time Jonah is happy about anything? Let us face it; it is hard to please some folks!

Then God prepares a worm that kills the gourd, and it dies (4:7). Jonah has no shelter . . . and the hot east wind blows in from the desert . . . and the sun begins to bear down . . . and again Jonah cries that he wishes he were dead (4:8). Now we come to the punch line:

And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for that which thou hast not labored, neither madest it grow; which came
up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle? (4:9-11).

God says to Jonah, “You don’t really even care for the gourd, just for yourself. But at least you are moved by the destruction of a gourd—a plant, a piece of vegetation. But you are not moved at all by the possible destruction of an entire city. Why, you are not even moved by the fact that the city contains 120,000 children, who don’t know their right hand from their left hand nor their left hand from their right hand.”

Now we get down to the real purpose of the book. The book is not about storms, great fish, gourds, or worms. It is about values. It is about priorities. It is about what we consider to be important. The question it asks is: “Which is of greater value to you: gourds or people?”

How many marriages have suffered because one or both of the marriage partners have been more concerned about “gourds”—success, popularity, possessions—than about the other person in that relationship?

How many homes have been torn asunder because one or more persons in that relationship have been more concerned about “gourds”—getting what they wanted—than in making the others in that home happy?

How many congregations have struggled because we get all caught up in “gourd-tending”—facilities, equipment, programs—than in taking care of the needs of people in and out of the church?

And how many souls have been lost because we are more concerned about what happens to “gourds”—our jobs, our hobbies, our things—than in what happens to the lost masses all about us!

CONCLUSION

Take one last look at the book of Jonah. It is a book without an ending; it closes with God’s words to Jonah. How did Jonah react? Does the story have a happy ending or a sad ending?

I think God intended that the Israelites should supply the ending, as they examined their own attitudes toward the Gentiles. And I think God has preserved the book down to the present because He wants us to supply the ending today. Let us ask the question, “What is our reaction to the story?”

If we have been fleeing from God, will we return?

If we find ourselves overwhelmed by trouble, will we turn to the Lord in penitence and prayer?

If God gives us a second chance, will we preach the Word with power to those round about us?

And if we are more interested in “gourds” than in people, will we get our priorities straightened out?

Will the story have a happy ending—or a sad ending as far as our response is concerned?

Most of us will show how the story ends as we leave here today, as we go about our daily lives. . . but some present will show how the story ends by whether you respond to the Lord’s invitation or not. I care not how far away from God you have gone, or how deep into sin you have sunk, if you will return to the Lord in penitence and obedience (Acts 2:38; Acts 8:22, 23), He is ready to help. He delivered Jonah; He will deliver you!

Endnotes

1See also Luke 11:30.
2This also showed God’s interest in the Gentiles, even at this time.
3Jonah’s attitude was no doubt similar to that of Nahum (Nahum 3:1, 7, 19).
4Charles Swindoll on his radio program, “Insight for Living.”
5Elsewhere in the Scriptures this phrase is used to refer to those ignorant of God’s Word, so some scholars think the 120,000 refers to the entire population of Nineveh. Personally, I do not think a reference to 120,000 people ignorant of God’s Word would have touched the heart of Jonah. But the thought of 120,000 innocent children might.