

Food for Thought: Lessons from Jonah



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Though Jonah's story is often used in children's materials and programs, it is one sometimes neglected by adults, and it is one which has much to impart. Let's take a look at just a few things we can learn from the story of Jonah.

One thing to start with is the fact that there are several parallels between Jesus and Jonah's story. Jesus himself pointed to the fact that His mission would look a little like Jonah's ("no sign shall be given to [this generation] but the sign of the prophet Jonah"). As Jonah spent 3 days in the deep (inside the fish, possibly even dead inside the fish, some argue, but either way, dead or alive, inside a marine creature for three days and taken for dead if not actually dead), so Jesus will be in a tomb for 3 days and then return to the land of the living (after 3 days in his watery tomb, Jonah also returned to the land of the living). Jesus also grew up and lived in the same place Jonah was from—Zebulun in Northern Israel, in Galilee. That is also pretty cool. The prophet whose 3 day experience was a picture of what was to come, a picture of something that would happen in the mission of the Messiah, was from the same region, the same home.

Jonah's recorded story begins when God does something very unexpected, and Jonah is not very happy about it. I too can be really crabby when God does something I don't expect or asks me to do something (or to put up with something) I was not expecting. Jonah immediately tries to run away from God and the mission he's been given. We aren't even told what about the command to go preach in Nineveh was the part that Jonah didn't like. Assyria's culture was one of cruelty, violence, and licentious. Was the problem that was afraid to go there? Or was it because he found Assyria so repellent and didn't want to spend any amount of time there? We aren't told why, but we are told that Jonah, who knew God, who was a prophet of God, did something very stupid; he thought

he could run away from God, and he of all people should've known better. It is a good reminder that being a Christian, even one of long standing or one whom God has used in the past doesn't mean we won't make some seriously stupid, if not tragic, choices.

Jonah's story includes some bravery and self-sacrifice as well—long before the end of the story. When the terrible stormy seas erupt around the ship Jonah has passage on, some very interesting things happen. For one thing, this storm is incredibly horrible, and the sailors want to know why. The sailors take the traditional practical steps for trying to stay alive at sea in a tempest; they lighten the ship by throwing their wares and tackle overboard. But they do more than that. They also expend considerable energy trying to figure out why this is happening. I think it is a good reminder that humankind needs and desires meaning. It says something important about reality—it is more than just the physical realm that counts. Then bravery and self-sacrifice enter the story. The sailors learn that it is on Jonah's account that this storm like no other is happening (he admits it), and they are terrified. He himself tells them to throw him overboard, but they don't do that yet. Even though they are terrified, they first try to save Jonah. Instead of stabbing him or immediately throwing him overboard, they first try to row their way to land. It doesn't work, but they tried. That's pretty selfless and brave. Jonah himself becomes more selfless at this point. He finally sees that his plan to outrun God or hide from God was really stupid, but also endangering other people. He is finally beginning to think about someone besides himself. He is thinking of these sailors. He is finally doing something Christlike (sacrificing his life to save theirs), and it is at this juncture that the story turns.

It is also interesting that Jonah tells the sailors that if they throw him into the sea, the sea will become calm; he doesn't just say that if they throw him overboard, they'll survive—he says the sea will immediately calm. And it happens just as he says. The storm didn't gradually lessen; it stopped suddenly. The sailors recognized this as supernatural, the hand of a real and powerful God. And they act accordingly. Years later, in a ship helplessly losing the fight in a storm at sea, Jesus would speak a command in the middle of the storm, and the sea would be suddenly becalmed. Those who were there to experience it, knew it wasn't natural. They said, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" They too saw that there was something supernatural here.

Three days later, after Jonah has been vomited onto a beach, he obediently heads for Ninevah, and it was almost certainly not an easy journey (or a short one). When he arrives and preaches at Ninevah, he is thrown for a loop when again something unexpected happens. The people of Ninevah repent. They don't just say, "I'm sorry"; from the king down to the lowliest subject, they put on sackcloth and sit in ashes in repentance. They even put the same signs of repentance on their animals. Wow. Even for us readers this is unexpected. It is a good reminder that even people who we think are

beyond hope of repentance...may not be...and thus we should never give up hope that they may repent and should not stop trying to help that happen and should not stop praying for them. This is not what Jonah expected, and he becomes angry. His pride was no doubt a big part of this (anger often is connected to pride). Jonah had told the Ninevites they'd be destroyed in 40 days because of their sin. Their unexpected repentance changed that, and Jonah probably feels like he looks like a fool.

At the end of the account, we learn important things about God's heart. He basically tells Jonah that he should be glad that this huge number of people won't be destroyed, He described them as a people who didn't know their right hand from their left (people who were clueless), and he also pointed out that Jonah should've at least felt compassion on their animals if not on the Ninevites themselves. Jesus, as He was dying on the cross, said something very similar. He said, "Father forgive them; they know not what they do." *They don't understand—have mercy on them.* And that same Messiah had earlier told the disciples, almost as an aside, that God cares about the sparrows and that not one of them dies alone, that the Father is with them.

Finally, while most prophets interacted with Israel or Judah, Jonah was sent to the Gentiles (and not even nice ones), another picture of what Jesus would do. For Jesus, as prophesied by Isaiah and others, would bring light and salvation to ALL mankind.