

May 2024

What's the Point...of Jonah? **Mark Garner**

The story of Jonah and his trip to Nineveh is well-known, and the book of Jonah teaches us some basic lessons about following God. Yet it also shows us some deeper truths about God's nature and the ways he guides us. When we look closely, the book teaches us about God's understanding, his eagerness to show us mercy, and his patience with each of us as he teaches us.

A Gracious & Compassionate God (Overview Of Jonah)

After Jonah rejects God's call to go to Nineveh (sometime between 800 BC and 750 BC), he takes a boat headed in the opposite direction (Jonah 1). When a strong storm comes, Jonah realizes at once what God is doing, yet he postpones the inevitable as long as possible, while the frightened soldiers who find themselves in the boat with Jonah try to figure out what to do. Eventually, the sailors find out about Jonah, and Jonah finally accepts responsibility for the storm, even advising them to throw him overboard.

The sailors do their best to keep the ship afloat without resorting to this drastic step, yet things get even worse. As they throw Jonah overboard, they plead with God to have mercy on them. When the sea suddenly calms, the sailors are even more overawed, and they praise and worship the living God. Despite their ordeal, God has turned it into a blessing, for now each of them has the chance to come to know the Lord, the living God.

As Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, the next part of the book is his prayer from inside the fish (Jonah 2). God hears his cry; he hears us too when we acknowledge our need for him and call on him humbly, wherever we may be, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, and no matter how badly we may have strayed. Jonah's prayer concludes with his realization of the need to let go of any idols that may hinder him from knowing God.

This time, Jonah does go to Nineveh (Jonah 3). Nineveh and the Assyrians had already made a reputation for their cruelty and violence; yet their king humbles himself, and calls the residents of Nineveh to call on God and ask him for mercy. His response shows how God's words have affected this callous ruler, who expresses his hope that God may show them compassion.

Despite all the awful things the Ninevites had done, God does not destroy the city when they turn away from their violence and idolatry. God desires mercy, and Jonah himself still doesn't understand this, as we see in the next chapter. The sailors and the Ninevites have been given the chance to seek God and know him, and God will give that same chance to Jonah.

The book closes with a conversation between Jonah and God (Jonah 4). Despite his outward success, Jonah's heart is full of anger and bitterness; even so, God will teach him patiently. God sends a plant to give Jonah shade from the heat, yet he soon takes it away, which leaves Jonah even angrier. This was not to punish Jonah, for God was trying to help Jonah understand God's thoughts. Throughout Jonah, we see God's care for everyone, and we see the many ways he gives each of us chance after chance to open our hearts to him so that he may give us the grace we need.

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What's the Point...of Jonah? Caleb Dillinger

Of all the Old Testament books, Jonah is the one that I have the most experience with. I have translated it from Hebrew into English, and Greek into English, and compared the various differences. I've written papers on it, taught classes on it, and preached on it. So, suffice it to say, I believe there is a point in reading Jonah today.

Jonah is a short book (takes less than 10 minutes to read), telling the story of a prophet of God who did not want to carry out God's will. Because he tried to forsake God's command, he is punished and gets swallowed by a sea creature (the word itself could be fish, whale, sea monster, something large enough to swallow him while). While in the belly of the creature, Jonah prays and repents. He then is vomited out onto dry ground and fulfills God's command of preaching to Nineveh.

They repent, which is why Jonah didn't want to preach there in the first place! These were bad guys, and enemies of Israel. But God spares them. This leads to a fascinating conversation where Jonah wishes he was dead because he dislikes the grace of God, and God never gives up on Jonah or the grace given the Ninevites. Jonah literally sat on a hill waiting for God to destroy the city. And God patiently works with Jonah to explain why Nineveh was spared. The book ends with the hanging question: should God NOT have had pity on the many people and animals of the city?

The story of Jonah tackles one of the most real struggles of the church today: followers of God who don't want to do God's will or see God's grace extended to their enemies. The story of Jonah corrects the misunderstanding that God only loves or cares for his own people. God loves all people! Even the sinners. Even his own people who sin and give him a bad name. Quite simply, God loves and gives grace. There are other nuanced things to learn, like God's value on animals (a reason he gives for not wanting to destroy Nineveh), or how our own actions can unintentionally lead to good things (Jonah running away leads to the sailors on his ship worshipping God). But without a doubt, grace and love are at the heart of Jonah's story. That is the point of reading Jonah today.