

MINOR PROPHET SERIES

God's Universal Mercy: Let God be God**(Jonah 3:1 – 4: 11)**Jerry Truex; Feb 15, 2009

A. Introduction**1. Themes**

The text we are looking at today emphasizes three things:

- a. God's grace overwhelms evil
- b. The Lord has mercy on anyone who repents
- c. It is foolish to make demands on God; let God be God

2. Jonah is satire

When we interpret the Book of Jonah, one of the biggest questions is what kind of literature is it? Critical scholarship has convinced most scholars that the story of Jonah is not historical. "Rather, it is an artistic, imaginative creation designed to carry a message."¹

Jonah is fiction, but a special kind of fiction. It is satire. Leland Ryken says that Jonah is "the greatest satiric masterpiece in the Bible."²

What is satire? Satire is literature that uses humor, irony, and sarcasm to expose foolishness. The prophet Jonah is satirized. The satire of Jonah is for our entertainment and for enlightenment.

Jonah is in all of us. What is fun about reading Jonah is that Jonah's foolishness can be discovered within each of us. When we discover Jonah within us, we can laugh and that helps us to screw our heads on right.

So when we read Jonah, don't get caught up trying to find scientific explanations for whether a person can survive in a big fish for three days—that would be foolish—rather, ask yourself how you are like Jonah and what you should do about it.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (2003) 230.

² Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (1987) 337.

Review of Jonah 1-2

As you recall from last week.

In chapter one, Jonah runs away from God. We are not told why. He hops on a boat, but a storm arises, he's tossed in the sea, and a big fish swallows him.

In chapter two, Jonah is in the belly of the fish and prays for God to save him. The fish spits him out onto dry land. Now, let's pick it up with chapter 3.

B. Jonah in Nineveh (3:1-10)

1. Jonah's Message (1-4)

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! (NRSV)

When the fish spit him out on dry land, he was exuberant. He had looked death in the face and survived. In chapter 1, Jonah had chosen assisted suicide over repentance, but at the end of chapter 2, he is happy to be alive.

So at beginning chapter 3, when the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah, he responds without hesitation at least for the moment. And he set out for Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. It was full of corruption, sin, debauchery, and vice. Every form of corruption was there.

The storyteller says that it took Jonah three days to walk across this city. That would make Nineveh about 50 miles in diameter. No city was that large in the ancient world. Nineveh was at most 3 miles in diameter.³ So the storyteller is using satirical exaggeration.⁴ For the storyteller, Nineveh is not a merely city, but it's a symbol of the world's most impressive evil, magnified and intensified.

Jonah is in the belly of another large fish. A large fish had swallowed him for three days. Now the city of Nineveh—an immoral cesspool of terror—has swallowed him for three more.

³ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (1976) 221.

⁴ Ryken (1987) 339.

The first day, Jonah trudges along for all day and never reaches the heart of the city. His task is enormous. He feels small, one man against a vast metropolis. Lost like a needle in a haystack inside this gigantic ... Las Vegas of a city.⁵

He stops and shouts out the message: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). Jonah is overwhelmed and his message looks pale. He preaches only an eight word sermon: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"—only four words Hebrew.

2. Nineveh's Repentance (5-9)

⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (NRSV)

Notice that Jonah didn't get into the heart of the city. Yet his tiny message of only four words (Hebrew) convinced the entire population to believe God. The storyteller wants us to see that it takes just a little bit a God's grace, just four words, to reverse the entire flow of the most corrupt city in the world. God's grace overwhelms evil.

We're not told directly that Nineveh repents, but we know this because they fasted and put on sackcloth, traditional symbols of repentance.

What is repentance? Repentance means "changing your mind." What did they change their minds about? We are not told other than the king called for turning from *wicked* (רַע *ra`ah*) ways and *violence* (חַמָּס *chamas*). It could be about just about anything that harms people—they are hundreds of things of which people can repent.

For example, people can change their minds about lying. At first, lying might seem to make life easier. Lies are fast. Lies are quick ways to get you what want. But then you discover that lying undermines trust, destroys relationships and can wipe out your credibility and reputation. So you repent. You change your mind about lying. You come to believe that lying does not get you what you want. Lying is actually an obstacle to meeting your real needs. As a result of changing the mind, a person changes the way they behave. Lying ceases.

All of Nineveh is depicted as repenting. Even the king of Nineveh, sitting in his palace, was overcome when he heard the message. Surprisingly, the king authorizes

⁵ Allen (1976) 222.

an official declaration requiring fasting and sackcloth for everyone, even the animals. This is over the top. The storyteller wants us to see that repentance was total—great and small, king and commoner, human and beast are included.

What is remarkable is that this foreign leader—a person who would not be considered a part of the people of God by Jonah and other Jews at that time—is described as acknowledging Yahweh. Neither the king nor the rest of the Ninevites know anything about Jewish atonement, food laws, or anything else that comes out of the Hebrew Bible. And yet they throw themselves on the mercy of God. And how does God react to these pagans?

3. God's Mercy (10)

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (NRSV)

Verse 10 says that Yahweh will save Nineveh because Nineveh repented. No fire and brimstone fell on Nineveh. It is important to see that "Nineveh"—the hated city of the hated Assyrian Empire—represents all foreign nations who have abused Israel.

God intends to save Israel, but God also intends to rescue Nineveh. God's mercy extends beyond the people of God. Not only that, God's mercy extends to people who were considered the *enemies* of the people of God.

This point is: *God's mercy is universal*. There are two verses in the NT that most people don't know are in the Bible. Listen to this:

2 Pet 3:9: [God does] not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

1 Tim 4:10. The living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

C. Jonah and God (4:1-11)

1. The Pouting Prophet (1-4)

¹But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (NRSV)

God has spared Nineveh. However, as verse 1 reveals, "This was very displeasing to Jonah." Literally, it reads, "Jonah was displeased [with] great displeasure."

Ironically, the Hebrew term *ra'ah* (רָעָה), translated "displeasure" here, is used to describe Jonah's emotional state. At the beginning of the story, the same term is used to describe the evil Ninevites (1:2). Jonah was sent to warn the Ninevites that God was going to judge their evil (*ra'ah*; רָעָה). They were forgiven because they repented, but now that evil applies to Jonah. And Jonah is angry (חָרָה; *charah*).

Jonah knew that God was compassionate and would have compassion on the Ninevites, if they repented. Jonah wanted no part rescuing Nineveh.

Jonah's problem is not theology. His theology is impeccable: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*chesed*; חֶסֶד), and ready to relent from punishing" (see Exod 34:6-7). This was a basic confession that occurs nearly verbatim six times in the OT (esp. Exod 34:6-7). Jonah speaks pious, well worn words. It's a theological cliché.

The problem is Jonah thoroughly disapproves of this being true for Nineveh. Jonah represents an exclusivistic view of God. God is the God only of Israel. God only saves Israel. God should not save non-Israelites and certainly not her enemies.

However, Jonah has a double standard. God could be merciful to Israel, but no one else. Jonah was unwilling to let God be God.

2. The Bush (5-9)

⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." (NRSV)

Jonah is in denial. He runs out of the city, sets up a shelter with the intension of viewing what will happen to the city. He has a ring-side-seat to watch whether his prophecy of doom will be fulfilled? His ego is on the line too. If God doesn't destroy the city, his credibility as a prophet is shot. Jonah is in denial and rebellion.

Yahweh has persuaded Nineveh to repent. But now Yahweh turns his attention to the angry, pouting prophet with the death wish on his lips.

He decides to give Jonah an object lesson. He causes a large plant to grow up suddenly over Jonah's shelter to give him additional shade, *to save him from his discomfort* (v. 6).

The word translated "discomfort" is the Hebrew *ra`ah* (רָעָה), the same term used earlier to describe the evil of the Ninevites (1:2). When the storyteller uses the term "discomfort" (*ra`ah*), he is winking at us. The term *ra`ah* has a double meaning. It refers to Jonah's physical discomfort, but also his "evil" way of thinking. Jonah has become the enemy.

The large plant is eaten by a worm. Three times the storyteller says that Jonah says that he would rather die than accept that God will have mercy on whomever God chooses. Here is a great satirical moment of the book:

Jonah is unwilling change his beliefs. He believes that God *should* or *must* be exclusivistic. More than that, he is saying, "God must be the way I want God to be; otherwise, I don't want anything to do with God."

Jonah says, in essence, "If God is different from the way I want God to be, then I'd rather die." Jonah fails to accept Reality. The greatest folly of all.

3. God's Last Word (10-11)

¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (NRSV)

God gets the last word and it's a question. Using an argument from the lesser to the greater, God explains that John felt remorse over the loss of the plant that he didn't produce. Shouldn't God feel remorse over an entire city with people and animals?

D. Reflections

The text we are looking at today—Jonah 3:1-4:11—emphasizes three things:

- a. God's grace overwhelms evil
- b. The Lord has mercy on anyone who repents
- c. It is foolish to make demands on God; let God be God