

Jonah

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Jonah: An Introduction

The book of Jonah is an amazing book and one of the most brilliantly told stories in the entire Bible with wit, and irony, humor and sarcasm. And what the book of Jonah is trying to accomplish in my opinion is truly amazing.

In the narrative, Jonah seems to function as a character who represents the covenant people of God, through whom God wants to do his work in the world. By exposing the flawed Jonah and holding him up for critique, it allows us to see how we are Jonah. The story is aimed at exposing the worst tendencies that tend to form inside of God's covenant people, which are pride, hard-heartedness, judgmentalism, tribalism, small mindedness, and an inability to grow and change and let God's grace explode the boundaries of what I thought was possible in the world. And through the lens of Jonah, God's people are able to examine our own lives and observe where we are acting like Jonah.

I came to this conclusion partly by asking a simple question: What kind of literature am I reading right now? And then I let that shape what I expect to get out of what I am reading. It is how I honor God's word and let it dictate what kind of story this is to me.

So, here we are with Jonah and it's a unique book because there is no other book of the Bible solely about a prophet. And not only that, but there is also no other book that has this unique story telling style. If you listen to teachers and read commentators across the whole spectrum there seems to be two main views. One is that the author has received a historical tradition about this guy named Jonah who is a real historical figure, and the author is passing on to us this story as a historical account. The second view also held by orthodox Christian scholars is that there is something more to this book than meets the eye. It's that Jonah is a form of narrative parable or short story and that this is a parable based on a historical real figure, but the author does not intend us to take the story as historical, but rather as parable, similar to the parable that Jesus told in Luke chapter 16 where he used a named character, the rich man and Lazarus. It clearly has the tell-tale signs of a parable, and Jesus uses a named figure, most likely someone the people would have been familiar with, and he and puts that real character into a parable-type setting.

Here is the problem. What has happened is that, because the fish is the main part of the story to most Christians, the choice between the two views all of a sudden becomes a litmus test on whether or not you believe in miracles. And if you take the view that the book is a parable, you don't believe in miracles, and you are sliding towards theological liberalism and you are denying the truth of the Bible.

And to be honest that is not helpful, especially because the fish is not the point of the story. What I want to do is humble myself before God's word and not tell it what I think it ought to be and let the author tell me what kind of story is being written.

And this is where the debate jumps in. No doubt Jonah is a historical figure. Jesus mentions Jonah and for some, because Jesus mentions Jonah and the people of Ninevah, that is a claim that the book is historical. But if you read the comments of Jesus in context, he is not talking about what kind of book it is and he is not appealing to the historicity of the book. He is doing what he always does. He says that these are stories and figures that point forward to him. He says that Jonah is a symbol of his coming death and burial. So, Jesus' words do not solve the issue for us; you must go to the book of Jonah itself.

No matter what view you hold, the book of Jonah is unique in how it tells its story. There are no dates. Other than Jonah, it does not really give any names. And yet it does give one of the most important figures in the ancient world, the king of Ninevah. He is the equivalent of the President of the United States. He is the ruler of the biggest empire the ancient world had ever known, and yet has no name, which is curious. Usually biblical authors, by telling the stories of David or Solomon or like the four biographies of Jesus in the New Testament, they make the historical claim -- names and dates and other events going on in history. But the book of Jonah is just different. It has a different kind of style. And what both camps agree on is that the book of Jonah is a beautiful piece of literary storytelling.

It reads like two forms of literature we have in our culture: satire and comic books. Satire stories are when you take very known and popular figures who are stock generic characters like political figures and celebrities, and you place them in extreme, ridiculous stories that just highlight how flawed the people are, and they become the butt of the joke. And satire is always aimed at not simply telling you about some events that took place, but rather at critiquing you the reader, while getting you to laugh while they are making fun of you.

For example, in the book of Jonah, you have the prophet, and he is actually the one who runs away from God and is the most hard-hearted person in the story. And God must get Jonah to do anything, and all he does is preach what in Hebrew is a short sermon in Ninevah, and it is very successful, and he is so angry he wants to die. And the book ends with him chewing God out for being too merciful and he would rather die than live with this God. That is the man of God in the story. And then you have the “bad guys” in the story, the sailors and the Ninevites who are the most murderous oppressive people the planet has ever known. And yet, they respond to God and repent immediately and turn their hearts toward God. Everything is kind of extreme, and it is the book of Jonah.

The other feature is that the book is full of what we can call comic book style. Everything is over the top. The word great or huge in Hebrew is “gadol” and it occurs fifteen times in the story. The storm is huge, the ship is huge, the fish is huge, the city is huge. In fact, the city is so huge it says it takes three days to walk through it. And any ancient reader would know that is a joke because that would be an over 30-mile-wide city and no city in the ancient world was that wide. Ninevah was seven miles around¹ and that was gigantic for its day. But the story is blowing everything out of proportion because it was the most significant city on the planet at the time in the ancient near east. The author is trying to wrap us in, and at the end of story get us to say, whoa, I am Jonah.

This is how I oriented myself before reading the book of Jonah. I hope it helps you as you embark on this journey.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nineveh-ancient-city-Iraq>

Jonah Chapter 1: Spiritual Slumber

¹Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

¹⁷But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Study

- What do you believe Jonah chapter 1 is about?
- Whenever the Bible gives us repetition, we should pay attention. Did you notice any repetition in Jonah chapter 1?

Throughout the chapter the phrases being asleep and going down show up repeatedly, so they might be important to the story as a whole.

- What does the imagery of falling asleep have to do with Jonah and what clues might it give to his state of mind/being?

One might say Jonah is experiencing spiritual slumber. Spiritual slumber occurs at times in our lives either due to factors beyond our control or because of decisions we have made where we do not feel that sense of vitality from Jesus. As a result, we travel down paths absentmindedly until we finally wake up and wonder how we got to where we are. Jonah 1 is a portrait of spiritual apathy, exploring how, why, and what is happening when we find ourselves in that predicament.

- Have you ever experienced spiritual apathy? How did that experience make you feel?

Jonah 1:1-2: Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”

The picture before us is one of God sitting on the heavenly throne while the atrocities of Nineveh are rising up before God, similar to the cries of the innocent before the flood. God decides to send Jonah to speak words of judgment on Nineveh that what they are doing is wrong and they need to change.

³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Jonah goes to Tarshish to flee from God. He is going as far west as was humanly possible in the ancient world, through to the strait of Gibraltar.

- What has caused you to flee from God, and what did it take for you to wake up?

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

Is God pursuing Jonah to be vengeful? God is pursuing Jonah because God is trying to offer divine mercy to Nineveh and wants Jonah to be a part of something beautiful. God wants to use Jonah as a vessel to help Nineveh change its ways because it is God's mission to reach people, rescue them and redeem them.

While God pursues Jonah, Jonah is asleep, and the sailors are wide awake. They are losing all their money with everything being thrown overboard. And they are all praying to their own god. Why? Because they are awake while Jonah is asleep. What else would they do but pray to each god trying to appease the right one and save themselves from the situation that they found themselves in.

Now look at Jonah. Jonah is a part of the covenant people, and he is going down again. Jonah goes down to Joppa, he goes down to the ship, he goes down into the depths of the ship, and then finally he goes down to sleep. The pagans are awake, and the man of God is asleep, descended into a state of spiritual slumber.

Jonah's sin is creating the environment for spiritual slumber to occur, and it has taken root in Jonah's life. Jonah is trying so hard to get away from God that he is not going to let anyone get in the way of his determination and what he believes is the right thing to do, in spite of what God has called him to do.

- How is it that Jonah can sleep in the midst of this storm? How is this similar or different to Jesus on the Sea of Galilee?

God has given Jonah a call to participate in God's story of God's grace, meeting more and more kinds of people, confronting humans in their oppression, injustice and wickedness, and offering mercy and grace. Jonah ran from that, not out of fear, but because he hates Ninevites, and he knows Yahweh will find a way to forgive them. Jonah thinks he knows better than God. And so, Jonah acts accordingly.

- In a way, our sin separates us from God. What is the danger of drifting further and further away from God? How do we get right with God? What role does our corporate confession and forgiveness play in all of this?

Jonah finds himself in a place where we all too often find ourselves. Our sin takes us further from God than we want and keeps us there longer than we want to be there. And the longer we are there, the more we become numb to things around us. We become blissfully unaware of our surroundings. And often it is those around us who suffer most when we are in this state. We can become a wrecking ball in the lives of those around us. This is a lesson for us on how we are never living in a silo. We are connected to our communities whether directly or indirectly.

- What lesson does this lend to our individualistic culture?

As the world has become ever more globalized, we know that we are as interconnected as we ever have been in human history. A simple decision as to what brand of chocolate bar to buy has a profound impact on the lives of people around the world. If something as small as a bar of chocolate can have a tremendous impact, what about the countless moral decisions we make? Eventually they are going to spill over into other people's lives and hurt them.

It is like the surface tension of a quarter, and you keep putting drops of water onto the surface of the coin. You put one drop after another, and it seems like the coin can hold as much water as possible. And then you reach one too many, and the water goes everywhere.

It is naïve to think my decisions will only affect me. And what Jonah 1 is telling us is that Jonah's decisions are not just his own decisions. It reveals to us how someone becomes a wrecking ball in the lives of other people, and it is through a thousand small compromises. What at first was just a private decision between Jonah and his God wreaks havoc in the lives of other people.

- If our lives are so interconnected, what is my obligation as a follower of Jesus in regard to my own decision making?

Everything gets more intense. Let's look at verse 6.

⁶The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

Now, how does Jonah wake up? Does he wake himself up? No, it's the people around him who wake him up and alert him to what is going on. Jonah is the prophet of God and yet he must be reminded to pray to get the attention of his God.

- Spiritual slumber can lead us to places where our lives are in danger and we don't even know it, how important is it to have people around who care about us and are willing to look out for us?

⁷The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

- What are the first steps to waking up from spiritual slumber?

The sailors question Jonah and he tells them that he worships Yahweh. But, based on his actions, would they know that Jonah worshipped anyone? Here is the scary part of being asleep at the wheel. It tends to cause us to do dumb and irrational things. Since that is the case, it may be that the first step to waking up from our slumber is to be willing to analyze our decisions. If we are able to sense irrationality and hypocrisy, then maybe we will begin to wake up to the fact that we are asleep.

- What are some other ways we can check to see if we are asleep at the wheel?

Jonah claims to be a person who fears Yahweh. But do we have evidence of his claim? Unfortunately, God also uses Assyria and Babylon to bring forth God's purpose, and they are not worshippers of Yahweh. So, Jonah, at least not during this season of life, is not behaving like a worshipper of God. His confession of faith and his actions are in deep contradiction to each other. It is the height of religious hypocrisy.

It might be at that confession that we begin to think to ourselves, "How could any person who claims to fear Yahweh run away from being invited into something special?" When this question is asked, we begin to sense that we are Jonah because we too have walked in Jonah's shoes and have been walking contradictions during our lifetime.

- In discerning your own life, what are the ways in which what you say you believe and how you live your life are disconnected? How do you address this disconnect?

¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

The tragedy for Jonah is that he cannot see the hypocrisy of his confession and his act of running away from God. This is why it is important for us to be surrounded by folks who are willing to be truthful to us with the collective church willing to hear the valid critiques of those looking at the church and saying, "that Jesus guy, he is great, but the church is not living up to his teachings in ways x, y, and z."

As we all know, it is hard to see when we are heading down the wrong path. Think of a meteor headed toward earth. All it takes is one slight push and the course of that meteor will change and miss Earth. It takes one small compromise to get us moving away from God and before you know it, you are nowhere near your intended destination. That is why we are told to not let sin take root but to pull it out as it begins because over time it will get bigger and bigger.

- What contradictions exist between the church's confession and how it lives its life that society around us is telling us to analyze?

Jonah does not seem like a great witness for God. And here's the thing. The scriptures are full of imperfect witnesses. It should lend us great joy to know that God uses the imperfect to accomplish God's perfect will.

- If God can use Jonah, are there people that God can't use?

¹¹Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

Every time I read the story of Jonah and get to this part, I wonder to myself, why did Jonah not just repent on the boat and tell God once he got to Tarshish he would go to Nineveh? I have not settled on an answer. I feel like it is plausible that Jonah had faith that God would save him and take him to Nineveh. It is also plausible that Jonah thought, if I can't get away, then what is the only way I cannot be used as a vessel? If I am dead? Maybe he hates Nineveh that much.

- Why do you think Jonah wants to be thrown overboard? Do you think he expects to live?

¹⁴Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you."

During chapter 1 it seems like a group of people have had a change of heart. And it does not include the prophet of God who belongs to the covenant people of God. It is the sailors. They seem to believe that Yahweh indeed has control over the sea. They offer the first prayer to God in the story. This near-death experience is causing them to rethink their allegiances.

- What message does this give us to know that the pagans pray before the prophet?

¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

- In the story, who is actually fearing Yahweh? How do you know?

Who says they fear Yahweh? Jonah. But who by their actions are revealing that they actually fear Yahweh? The sailors. In the Bible, to make a sacrifice to God is not a simple task. When one makes a sacrifice to God there is an admittance that I am not God. It is putting God where God belongs, above me in the hierarchy of my life. To sacrifice, therefore, is to humble oneself and say to God, "you are in control."

- What does making a sacrifice to God signify about the sailors? What is the relationship between intellect and actions regarding faith?
- What are the sacrifices to God that you make in your life -- the ways in which you tell God that God is in control?

The sailors' actions reveal to us that no matter who gives the message to non-believers, whether by saying what to do or by their actions saying what not to do, God can work through imperfect witnesses. And yet, that does not give us license to do whatever we want. Because sadly, Jonah misses out on something special. When we disobey God and choose not to be a vehicle of God's love, grace, and mercy, we miss out on one of the greatest experiences in life. It is an extreme danger of spiritual apathy.

- I wonder, have we created a culture of being able to say that I fear Yahweh, and yet with our actions reveal the complete opposite because we do not hold each other accountable?

¹⁷But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

At the end of the chapter, we are left wondering if Jonah is going to wake up from his spiritual slumber. Jonah has reached rock bottom by being placed in the belly of the beast. The beautiful thing about God is that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And God can use anything to God's purpose, even a sea creature that seems to be, at first glance, a vehicle of death. And yet, it is this vehicle of death that will be turned into a vehicle of grace.

It is no wonder Jesus would appeal to just this moment in the story to describe himself in Matthew 12:38-42. Jesus sees this moment of God enveloping his covenant people in death because of their sin and rebellion, the moment they can't go any further in their rebellion, and God meets them right there in their brokenness and repentance. And suddenly, the moment of death is turned into a chance at new life. And Jesus says, that's what I am going to do. Jesus lives as the antitype of Jonah, completely other-centered, self-giving, and aware of others and their perpetual wellbeing.

Jesus absorbs into himself all of our sin and our apathy and our ruin that causes our world to be what it is. He takes the hit for us, but somehow, strangely, the death of Jesus gets turned upside down into this vehicle of life. His life conquers our sin and death itself. In his resurrection, as we grab onto him in faith, we can experience a second chance at being a human being -- a new and different kind of life. And the life given to Jonah after this experience -- he is living on pure grace from this point out.

- We all are like Jonah living off of pure grace, what do you want to accomplish with your borrowed time?

So, how do we wake up spiritually? What do you have to do to wake yourself up spiritually? What does Jonah do to wake up spiritually? That is the wrong question to be asking. Jonah does not do anything to wake up; something is done to him. Right at the moment where he feels like he is meeting his own death, that is the place that God meets him with God's grace and gives him a second chance at life.

We as the church are a community of people trying to wake up to the fact that God has done something for us, and it starts with the humility to realize that we are helpless on our own.

- Wherever you are in your faith journey, is God trying to wake you up? If so, let's throw our hands up in the air and be open to God's grace.

Jonah Chapter 2: Gods Mercy

2¹From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God: 2²When I was in trouble, Lord, I prayed to you, and you listened to me. From deep in the world of the dead, I begged for your help, and you answered my prayer. 3³You threw me down to the bottom of the sea. The water was churning all around; I was completely covered by your mighty waves. 4⁴I thought I was swept away from your sight, never again to see your holy temple. 5⁵I was almost drowned by the swirling waters that surrounded me. Seaweed had wrapped around my head. 6⁶I had sunk down deep below the mountains beneath the sea. I knew that forever, I would be a prisoner there. But, you, Lord God, rescued me from that pit. 7⁷When my life was slipping away, I remembered you—and in your holy temple you heard my prayer. 8⁸All who worship worthless idols turn from the God who offers them mercy. 9⁹But with shouts of praise, I will offer a sacrifice to you, my Lord. I will keep my promise, because you are the one with power to save. 10¹⁰The Lord commanded the fish to vomit up Jonah on the shore. And it did.

Study

- What do you think was going through Jonah's head while being in the belly of the beast?

Jonah finds himself swallowed up by a sea creature and instead of dying, he finds himself praying to God and writing a poem of his repentance from inside the fish. And what we could explore is how would the original readers understand the meaning of all this?

The first rule of being a good listener to any act of communication is context. A story about a rebellious Israelite prophet being swallowed up in the belly of a fish, and then praying and getting vomited out -- what does that mean? It depends on the context; if you just read the book without reading any other part of the Bible, you might say it is just a story about obeying God.

Imagine you are at Starbucks sipping on some coffee, and you overhear two people talking in the corner. One of them says, "I just know I am going to kill him." You might need to call the cops because you have uncovered a plot to murder someone. Or maybe they are talking metaphorically after an argument. Maybe, they are talking about a character in a book or play they are writing. One word with different meanings, based on its context.

So, what is the context of Jonah? It starts with Jonah being among the prophetic books because Jonah was a prophet. The story of Israel is that God redeems them out of slavery in Egypt. God brings them into a covenant relationship with Godself. God gives them instruction about how they are to live as a holy witness to the nations. God brings them into the promised land, and they fall short as covenant partners with God.

As the covenant people give their allegiance to other gods, it leads them to injustice and sin, and abandonment and faithlessness to Yahweh. It is the role of a prophet to reveal to Israel their faithlessness and covenantal failures and then warn them of their repercussions. Eventually their faithlessness led to Babylon sacking Jerusalem and exiling people from the promise land. However, Yahweh's commitment to God's promises is even stronger than Israel's rebellion and sin. And the prophets always look forward to a time on the other side of Babylon where a remnant will continue Israel's story.

The book of Jonah, too, is about a faithless covenant partner who rebels and abandons God. He suffers the consequences of his actions, and then because God is who God is, God redeems them by God's grace and brings them out the other side. It is a book about an individual who fits the storyline. And even more, what happens to Jonah seems to fit with the metaphors and images the prophets used of Israel.

Hosea 8:1-4 ¹Set the trumpet to your lips! One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have broken my covenant and transgressed my law. ²They cry to me, "My God, we know you!" ³Israel has spurned the good; the enemy shall pursue him. ⁴They made kings but not through me; they set up princes but without my knowledge. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

- Does this sound like Jonah chapter 1?

Hosea 8:8-10 ⁸Israel is swallowed up; now they are among the nations as a useless vessel. ⁹For they have gone up to Assyria, a wild ass wandering alone; Ephraim has bargained for lovers. ¹⁰Though they bargain with the nations, I will now gather them up. They shall soon writhe under the burden of kings and princes.

What is the metaphor used of an empire coming to overwhelm Israel? It is the swallowing up of Israel.

And to make this more meaningful, Hosea is one of the earliest prophets on the scene, and so when later prophets use the same or a similar metaphor, you must go back to the imagery in this passage to better understand what those later prophets are talking about.

Jeremiah describes it like this. Jeremiah 51:34 *"King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon has devoured me; he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel; he has swallowed me like a monster; he has filled his belly with my delicacies; he has spewed me out."*

Now it is not just Israel being swallowed up; the later prophet Jeremiah further develops the image and now it's a beast coming to swallow up God's covenant people because of their faithlessness. What is developed here is an image of God raised up or allowed this beast to come and swallow God's own people because of their faithlessness.

This same language is also used in the Psalms. In the Bible, it is very common for Israel's sin and the suffering of consequences to be described as drowning in a flood and being swallowed by a great sea beast. With Jonah, then in the book with his name, whether an historical person or not, the message is the same.

- Do you believe the readers would have seen their own story being told through the story of Jonah?

I think the most important thing in the readers' minds is they would have seen their own story as Israelites told through the story of Jonah. The story of their own faithlessness, their own suffering of the consequences, and then the big question mark of is God going to be faithful to redeem us to the other side?

The fish is one of the most powerful images in the story. Jonah is at the bottom and can't get any further and it is the exact opposite of the wide-open sea he was just experiencing. He is in the belly of the beast. And the belly of the beast is an image of being trapped in seasons of hardship or suffering, or pain and confusion. And in Jonah's case, it is because of a mess of his own making.

- What do you do when you are in the belly of the beast? How do you pray through this process? What this prayer is, is an invitation to see Jonah's experience of praying through his hardship and suffering.

Jonah is facing the consequences of his own actions. Followers of Yahweh can find themselves in the belly of the beast because of the actions of others. Think about Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah who end up in the fiery furnace because they are in exile because of the sins of their parents. How do you deal with that? What do you do when it is not your own fault, and you can't point to someone else's sin, and it is just the tragedy of life that struck you? In these times of being in dark confined spaces, this is what this prayer is about.

- How can you use this prayer as a lens for your own life and how you process what is going on in your life?

Jonah 2:1-2 ¹Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice."

The first thing that the hardship causes him to do is to cry out for help.

- Can you think of a moment in your past where you could do nothing else than cry out for help from God? Is it possible for being in a place of dependency on God freeing?

Being in a place where all we can do is cry out is difficult. That same spot of desperation, depending on how we respond, can also be liberating. If we come to understand that there is nothing else we can do and we toss aside the shame we might feel and turn to God, it frees us to just do what needs to be done and to turn all things over to God.

- How is Jonah finally a person to be emulated during this prayer?

For Jonah, this hardship has caused him to cry out. And notice what he says about God. Jonah says, "God, you are listening?" And if I am being honest, that is not the conclusion I always come to in the belly of the beast. I readily feel like God is not listening and maybe God has abandoned me. And yet, Jonah draws the opposite conclusion.

Why does Jonah draw that conclusion? *³You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me."*

Let's ask the question, whose waves are crashing over Jonah? Jonah says it is God's waves. But who threw him into the depths of the waters? The sailors. But who does he say here did it? God.

Yes, the sailors threw him over, but he sees God's involvement and hand in it. Now, who is responsible for Jonah being in the situation that he is in? It is Jonah because God is not responsible for Jonah's

sin. And at the same time, God is not surprised as to what is going on in our lives. Jonah sees God's fingerprint all over it, even if God is not responsible for his decisions. But it does mean that now that he made those decisions, God is present with him.

- What grace and hope can be found knowing that God is with us in the belly of the beast?
- Is God intent on making our lives comfortable and happy, or does God have something else as a higher priority?

People who believe that God's number one priority in our relationship is to make sure that we live an easy, comfortable life are wrong. God is not about making us as comfortable as possible. Throughout the New Testament letters, we are encouraged to persevere; we are reminded that there will be suffering. Comfort is not God's highest priority. Right from the beginning in the book of Genesis it seems like God's goal is to call a people to Godself and to help them rely on God, who has their best interest at heart because we do a very bad job of being in charge of our lives and our world.

This is why when God brings us to a place where all we can do is humble ourselves, it is really an act of mercy since that place will lead us to dependency of God. And the best place for us to be is with the realization that we need God: I can't and should not just do whatever I want; I should seek God and live for God, because in seeking and finding God, we find true life; we find abundant life.

- Why is humility a great place to be? How does humility affect all areas of our lives?

What the book of Jonah is teaching us is that there is no sin of my own, no sin of anybody else's that is beyond God's redemptive reach to use as an opportunity to shape me in a profound way.

- Are there moments in your past when you have experienced God's mercy and had that mercy shape you into a more faithful follower of Christ?

⁴Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?"

Here is Jonah trying to get as far away as possible from God, and it is only when he is in the belly of the beast does he think to look for the place where God is present in his life. In the temple. The temple is the place where heaven and earth meet. And so now, in the darkness, amidst the innards of this beast, Jonah finally decided to turn around and look at what he was missing.

In Psalm 23 we read that goodness and mercy are chasing us all the days of our lives. And here we have a clear picture of what David understood. No matter where I am, God's mercy chases me, and if God's mercy is chasing me that means God is chasing me. Sometimes it takes hardship in order for God to look more appealing than our own desires.

⁵The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head ⁶at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.

In the belly of the beast, all Jonah has is God. And here is the best thing about that position. God is all that Jonah needs in the belly of the beast to survive. It is in the belly of the beast that clutter of life falls away and you begin to see that God is the most important thing and being in our lives. The only thing that Jonah has going for himself is that God is "covenantally" committed to him.

And that is paradoxically the worst and best experience you can have because you discover the truth of who you are – a frail human whose creator is turned to mercy and grace, and faithfulness, which is what motivates Jonah to say what he says next and emerges with gratefulness.

- What are some other ways or things God can use to get use to understand who God truly is?

⁷As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

What does it mean to remember the Lord? I believe that it means to remember all that God has done for you in your life. Life has a way of clouding or fogging our vision of God. It can cause us to forget even temporarily the goodness of God. And yet, it is in the belly of the beast that Jonah has this experience of remembering God.

In the book of Jonah, when he is first swallowed up by the fish, the fish is referred to in masculine terms. Once Jonah is inside and writing his poem, it changes to female. I believe it is correct to think the belly of the fish indicates digestion at first and certain death, to protection and the womb of the female fish.¹ Meaning, for us, the belly of the fish can be a place of death and pain and hurt. And that same place when we turn to God can be a place of care and growth.

The important thing is to realize what we have going for ourselves, and that is that God is committed to all humanity and that God wants to redeem me. That position helps me turn to the hotspot of God's presence. And as a follower of Jesus, the hotspot that we look toward to remember God's favor and who God is, is Jesus. This is why it's important not to look to our circumstances to tell us how loved and cared for we are, but to look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is his resurrection life that offers grace and a new chance at life. To me, that is the only thing I have going for me. And then I look to the Lord for deliverance.

⁸Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. ⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" ¹⁰Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto the dry land.

Deliverance indeed belongs to the Lord!

¹<https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/gender-and-gestation-in-jonah>

Jonah Chapter 3: Judgment and Love

^{3:1}The 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.” ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Humans 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. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” 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.

- What pops into your mind after reading the chapter in its entirety?

The 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.”

The book of Jonah was supposed to be about God and the people of Nineveh. However, we have been sidetracked by Jonah’s escapades. We are back to our regularly scheduled programming. God is trying to deal with Nineveh for their atrocities by dispatching God’s messenger to cry out against it and let them know what will happen if they do not change.

- How comfortable are you talking about God’s judgment?

Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were brilliant at overthrowing other cities and empires and they did not do this with pleasantries; they were brutal conquerors. The city of Nineveh housed the royal complex with the king’s palace, and when you went into the royal complex you would see commissioned artwork depicting the exploits of the king. One such depiction is of the conquering of the Israelite city of Lachish which is also discussed in the Bible.

You see a siege ramp built up to the city walls and then depictions of Israelites being skinned alive. You would see servants captured and impaled on those trees around the hills of the city.

We must remember that these are the things that would come into an Israelite’s mind about Assyria. And the idea that God would send a prophet to confront the injustice and oppression of Nineveh... you would be excited that finally they are getting their day. God is confronting one of the most exceptional committers of human injustice. That is the background of Jonah going on his mission.

³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

- Do you notice anything interesting about Jonah's message? What would you expect to see that is missing? What would you have said to Nineveh?

Jonah gives a very brief message to the people of Nineveh, and it includes two things: the time frame and an event. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown," by whom? We do know when, but do we know why? And can Nineveh avoid it? The prophets always included some chance to turn back to God and repent. But nothing from Jonah on the topic. And who is declaring this judgment?

- Do you think this is the message that God was expecting Jonah to preach?
- Why do you think Jonah's message was missing so much?

When you read the book of Jonah one thing that sticks out is that no one acts as you expect them to act. The sailors sacrifice to God. The prophet of God runs away. And the big bad empire is going to repent after the shortest message ever preached.

Is it possible that Jonah is still trying to do whatever he can to ensure Nineveh does not repent? It is possible because Jonah does not want Nineveh to repent. He said so earlier, because if they repent Jonah knows the character of God. God will show them mercy and grace if they repent, and Jonah wants none of that. Jonah wants judgment and punishment.

Whatever the reason for the short message, we are not given Jonah's motivation behind his short message. Either way, the message does indeed work.

- Is Jonah being faithful to his call as a prophet?

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

- How is it that the people come to believe God when Jonah never mentions God?
- How do the Ninevites relate to the sailors, and what does that say about God's Spirit at work in the world?

In the Bible, fasting is a way to humble yourself. It is in fasting that you are declaring dependency upon God and not the things of this world. And let us not forget that sackcloth is an itchy burlap fabric. Essentially, the people are trying to tell God that they are serious about their repentance. And we witness something amazing -- the repentance of the cruelest empire to ever exist even if we do not know for how long. This is what it was all about. God wants people to repent so that they can find true life. And if it is possible for Nineveh to repent after that brief message, then there is hope for any and everyone.

- How is it that we know Nineveh is repenting? It is because of their actions. How does this passage of repentance relate to James' teaching about how faith without works is dead¹?

¹James 2:14-26

We know because of their actions that the Ninevites believe God. This may seem simple, but it is important for us to hear. Nineveh, like its predecessors, believed they had the right to decide what was right from wrong, good from bad. However, God is the one as creator of all to make that decision. Therefore, God renders judgment informing them that they are wrong. At that point they need to make a decision. Do we continue doing what we are doing and take the place of God in our own lives? Or are we going to humble ourselves and acknowledge God's rightful place in our lives? They decide to believe God, and their belief is joined and expressed by this life-giving response.

- When people look at your life, outside of you attending a church service, how do they know that you are a follower of Jesus?

The Bible is reminding us here that to have faith in God is not to just know that God is the creator of the universe. Scripture tells us that even the demons know who God is.² If there is no shred of evidence of my belief, then do I really believe? And we truly must wrestle with the teaching that to have faith -- to believe that Jesus is Lord -- is accompanied by a wholistic life response. Since the Ninevites truly believe, they respond with action showing that their hearts are fertile ground.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Jonah's brief message has gone viral and reaches the king. The king sees the errors of his ways, even if we do not know for how long. The interesting thing is that the king goes a step further than the people. He sits down in the dust. Maybe this is because he understands that he is the one that sets the tone for the empire and he is the one that has commanded so much of this brutality. He is more at fault than everyone else in the kingdom. The king gets off his throne and humbles himself to the point of remorse, regret, and repentance signified by his sitting down in the dust.

- Have you ever found yourself in the position of the king, having put yourself in the place of God and then coming to understand what you have done? How did you respond?

⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Humans 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. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

Repent is a key concept in the Bible, and the Hebrew word used for it is "Shuv" (pronounced shove). This is an image from walking -- you are going a certain way, and a judgment is rendered that you are going the wrong way.³ And so, you stop, pivot, and about face. The prophets pick up this word and turn it into a powerful metaphor for how we relate to God.

The problem for humans is that we believe the road we are on is the road that leads to life. And what God does is to tell us that we are on the road to death. When we are informed of this, the right response is to shuv/repent. The people and the king recognize this, and they call out to God.

²James 2:19

³<https://www.cmj-usa.org/blog/hebrew-word-study-shuv-return-repent>

I would imagine that we do not like to talk about God's judgment, and we especially do not like to discuss the passages that say God is fiercely angry at a person or group of people. However, this book is in part about God's judgment on human behavior and informing us that it is wrong and letting those people know that they need to repent.

Is it possible that what makes it hard to discuss God's judgment is that we are trying to understand different parts of God's character? The Bible tells us that God is a God of judgment. At the same time, the Bible tells us that God is love. How do we put this together without just picking one and screening out the other one?

- Does God's judgment and God's love relate to each other? If they do, how so?

I believe the loving thing for God to do when we are destroying the world around us is to render judgment and let us know that what we are doing is wrong. God has that prerogative. Because if God did not step in but lets it keep going without end, is that loving? No, that sounds like a God that does not care, and we know God does care; God is not apathetic. Judgment is not condemning people; judging is informing people that the road that they are on is leading to death in hopes of getting them to the road that leads to life.

The world is full of injustice. God informs us in Genesis that every inclination of the human heart is evil.⁴ What humanity does to each other is not good, and that is a judgment.

Love and judgment are two sides of the same coin; they are in harmony with one another when we let the scriptures tell us what they each are. If we really think about it, we want a world where there is justice, and we want there to be a God who will hold human beings accountable for their decisions. If there is not a God of judgment who is higher than any human to decide what we do is good or evil, there is no hope for our world. Every time humans have decided what is good and evil for themselves, it has gone down a terrible road.

- As Christians, how do we place our hope in judgment?

If we cherish the hope of a world made right, of a restored creation, we cherish the hope of a judgment of all that has been done wrong being named, dealt with, and made right. But flip it over. If there is a God of judgment and that God is not also love, there might be hope for the world, but there is no hope for us. Judgement is good when its spotlight is on others, and it's good when its spotlight is on me.

We can't just be passionate about justice when something impinges on us. And then the moment the spotlight is turned on me and I no longer get to define good and not good in ways that excuse my behavior, not want judgment.

If there is a God of judgment, I am not it. If there is a God who defines good and evil, then it means that I don't get to do that in ways that excuse my behavior. We can't say we believe in forgiveness and that it is good to be generous, meanwhile spending all our money on ourselves and having burned bridges all over our families, of people that we won't forgive. And when that gets exposed, we are like, "whoa, don't judge me, that is not loving." It challenges us when what we think is good is suddenly declared not good.

⁴Genesis 6:5

If we are honest, there are areas of Christianity that are difficult to believe -- Pray for those who persecute you, everyone is your neighbor, my life is not my own. Those are not easy to live out. However, to accept God's judgment is an act of faith, accepting God's judgment of what is good and not good is superior to my own.

Essentially then, we are asking what does God do with judgment? Is it just to smash us and cause us to wallow?

- What is the role of judgment in God's plan?

¹⁰When 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.

What did the Ninevites find when they repented? They found God's grace. The purpose of judgment is to help people find grace and mercy. Out of love, God renders judgment on our behavior so that we can repent, and the moment we repent, we find God's amazing grace. Judgment brings restoration.

And so, we read Jonah 3 and realize repentance is a beautiful word. It is how we get reborn, restored and renewed when we realize that we are not God. The king is a beautiful picture of repentance. He takes off the symbols of his power and autonomy and puts them aside. He intentionally puts aside the very things that give him the authority to decide good from evil for himself.

The only thing we do not know is how long the king will stay off the throne. It's a dilemma: Is there good news for people that can't even repent right? The answer is yes!

This is a story about a king who oversees his good world and sees the people in his world ruining each other. And out of his love he renders the judgment that this is not right and has to be dealt with.

And the good news is that the king rendered judgment the way that no one expected -- he also gets up off his throne, takes off his robes, and humbles himself in the language of Philippians 2. He humbles himself to take on human flesh and take the status of a servant. He wallows in the ashes of human existence and on the cross he absorbs his own judgment into himself on our behalf.

And because his love is stronger than death and our sin, his resurrection from the grave makes possible this new way for those who will grab onto him in belief and accept his judgment on us that we are indeed screwed up and there is no hope for us beyond his commitment to us. And when we turn to Jesus the risen Lord, we find that grace has already been extended.

The cross is where all of these attributes of love, judgment and grace come into perfect harmony. The cross is a statement of God's love and God's judgment, and it creates an opportunity for grace.

- What are the thrones in our lives; what are the ways we crawl back onto them and accept God's judgment and find God's grace in Jesus Christ?

Jonah Chapter 4: When God Loves Your Enemy

⁴¹Jonah was really upset and angry. ²So he prayed: Our Lord, I knew from the very beginning that you wouldn't destroy Nineveh. That's why I left my own country and headed for Spain. You are a kind and merciful God, and you are very patient. You always show love, and you don't like to punish anyone. ³Now let me die! I'd be better off dead. ⁴The Lord replied, "What right do you have to be angry?" ⁵Jonah then left through the east gate of the city and made a shelter to protect himself from the sun. He sat under the shelter, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. ⁶The Lord made a vine grow up to shade Jonah's head and protect him from the sun. Jonah was very happy to have the vine, ⁷but early the next morning the Lord sent a worm to chew on the vine, and the vine dried up. ⁸During the day the Lord sent a scorching wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head, making him feel faint. Jonah was ready to die, and he shouted, "I wish I were dead!" ⁹But the Lord asked, "Jonah, do you have the right to be angry about the vine?" "Yes, I do," he answered, "and I'm angry enough to die." ¹⁰But the Lord said: You are concerned about a vine that you did not plant or take care of, a vine that grew up in one night and died the next. ¹¹In that city of Nineveh there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell right from wrong, and many cattle are also there. Don't you think I should be concerned about that big city?

- Why do you think Jonah is upset?

As chapter 3 came to an end it seemed like Jonah was a successful prophet. The Ninevites were repenting and after repenting they were able to discover God's grace reaching out to them. And you would think that Jonah would be happy, most prophets' warnings are not heeded and yet his were.

¹But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He 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 and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. ³And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah in his anger begins to pray to God. And it does seem unusual. We do not normally pray to God and begin to just unload on God. We normally teach people to pray and when doing so it does not seem to me that lashing out at God is on the list of things we are told to do. And yet, here is Jonah yelling at God, and not just telling God off, he is doing so because God has stayed true to God's character by being merciful. And Jonah reminds God that what he thought would happen has come to pass. God has been merciful to the Ninevites.

Jonah with what seems like clenched teeth, hot with anger prays to God. And when we think about prayer, we do not normally think about praying to tell God off. No, we pray to praise God, to thank God, and to ask for things among many other things. But here is Jonah, and he prays, he talks to God to yell at God for doing something merciful. God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, relenting from punishment."¹

¹Exodus 34:6

The phrase that Jonah uses is like the equivalent of John 3:16 in the New Testament. It is famous and used often. The story that Jonah is quoting from is in Exodus during the golden calf story where the people are disobeying, Moses steps up as intercessor, and then God forgives them and renews the covenant. After that all happens, Moses asks God, why God would do such a thing and God says, “I am Yahweh, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”²

- What is the connection between Jonah’s experience and that of the Israelites on Mount Sinai during the golden calf story?

What Jonah 4 is about is exposing the dark side of God’s mercy and grace, if you will. Because of course I am happy when I realize how messed up, I am, and I turn to Jesus and He shows me His grace. But it becomes scandalous to me when I realize Jesus is like that to the person that I despise and I think to myself, “God, do you know what they did to me?” And we begin to understand, if we were in Jonah’s situation, we might feel the same way.

From Elena Ortiz talking about her time in Rwanda: “In 1994, Rwanda witnessed a genocide against the Tutsis in which approximately one million lives were lost. Perpetrated by ordinary citizens, neighbors turned against neighbors as children and families were senselessly slaughtered. Anyone in Rwanda over the age of 25 lived through the genocide, while anyone younger was born to parents who survived, meaning that scars of genocide traumatize in some way the entire population. Since the genocide ended in mid-1994, Rwanda’s development has exploded both in terms of economic growth and reconstruction of a national identity. At an estimated 97% reconciliation rate, Rwandans have collectively resisted revenge and have instead turned towards forgiveness and healing, a tremendous feat that I think few societies could achieve so soon after a period of such violence.”³

For more on the story of great reconciliation please read this article found in the footnotes, “Rwanda’s Resilience: the power of forgiveness and unity” by Immy Mulekatete.⁴ Because so often we look at these examples and think to ourselves they would be impossible. And so often when people hurt us, we take the mindset of Jonah, but what if God calls us to the mindset of the Rwandan people?

- Are there people that you still have to forgive? How would the changing of the hearts of those who hurt you help the situation? How about the changing of your heart?

The scandalous side of God’s grace and mercy is that it is not just for God’s covenant people. God’s grace and mercy is also for people we may not agree with, we may despise, people who have wronged us, and even people we believe don’t deserve it. And so, what God is going to now do is try three times to help Jonah understand God’s grace in a new way.

⁴And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵Then 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.

- What message is given to us when we see God trying to reason with Jonah?

²Exodus 34:6

³<https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/a-rwandan-lesson-to-americans-in-reconciliation-forgiveness-and-community>

⁴<https://www.undp.org/rwanda/blog/rwandas-resilience-power-forgiveness-and-unity>

God's first response is to ask Jonah a question and Jonah responds by stonewalling and just ignoring God. God tries to engage which is amazing, and yet Jonah ignores God and leaves the city. Jonah makes a shelter which means he plans on being there a while and is waiting to see what will happen to the city.

Jonah to me is looking for something bad to happen to Nineveh. Jonah preaches, "'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'" (Jonah 3:4) Maybe Jonah is waiting for the forty days to pass and the destruction to occur.

The last word of Jonah's message is "hapak." We normally see two translations, "turned over" or "overthrown." In Hosea 7:8 we hear that "Israel is like baked bread that has not been hapak/turned over." If a city is full of injustice and evil and it gets turned over, it is a negative connotation. You do not want to be a part of that city. An example of this can be found in Lamentations 4:8: "the sin of my people is greater than that of Sodom which was hapak in a moment without a hand to help." This is an overturning that is clearly negative, like destroyed.

Hapak can also mean turning something from bad into good. For example, Psalm 30:11, "God you have hapak my grief and morning into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy."

- Which meaning of the word do you think Jonah is intending? Which meaning do we often hope for when it comes to those who hurt us?

Which meaning might God intend? Which meaning might Jonah be intending? Which happens? It is the change from bad to good that occurs. Could Jonah's message be two-fold, a word that if they do not change their ways they will be destroyed, and a prophetic word that they would be changed because they would repent?

Jonah is upset with God because nothing he hopes will happen is coming to fruition. Jonah is stomping off like an upset child that did not get their way.

So, God will try to reason with Jonah again with a different technique. ⁶The 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. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When 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."

This is the only part of the story where we hear that Jonah is happy in the entire narrative and it does not last long. God provides a tiny worm to destroy the bush and Jonah wants to die. It seems like Jonah has had enough. And after it all, God has one last question for Jonah with a twist.

⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die."

- Does God's patience with Jonah give you any hope? How has God been patient with you? How does it feel when God is patient with those who hurt you? Is there any significance to the Jonah story and our lives that the first time it is explicitly mentioned in the Bible that God is angry is when God is angry with Moses for not having faith in God to help him deliver his people out from Pharaoh's hands?

God is being patient with Jonah. God is trying to shake Jonah out of his irrationality. And even though Jonah is still indignant, God does not give up because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.⁵ God is committed to Jonah.

- How does it make you feel to know that God is committed to Jonah? Do you believe God is as committed to you?

¹⁰Then 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. 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?"

God first tried to expose how foolish it is that Jonah is angry at showing grace to the Ninevites. Nothing has worked, so God recognizes that Jonah is finally thinking about something other than himself. And out of care for Jonah, God continues to try to help Jonah.

God says to Jonah, you have tender care for this bush and grants the legitimacy of his emotional attachment to the bush. And then God is like, if you can care for a bush, is it not right for me to care for people, especially those that are misguided? Now, God is not excusing the Ninevites, they are very accountable for their behavior, but they are lost and misguided and that is where the turmoil comes from. And God wants them to come to the truth about who they are just as Jonah did.

Interestingly enough, we do not get Jonah's response. And maybe his response is not important. Maybe what is important is how we respond to God's question. Maybe this book is not really about Jonah, maybe it is a book about all of God's covenantal people individually. And the real question is this.

- How am I living in response to God's question to Jonah?

Could this passage be for those of us who struggle with forgiveness, those of us who struggle with the wideness of God's grace and mercy? God is trying to get Jonah outside of himself. In the story of Jonah, who is the most hard-hearted and hateful person in the story? It is Jonah. And God gently tries to get Jonah to see what is happening. It is as if God is saying to Jonah, "You are just as broken and as misguided as they are, don't you see?"

- How can God love our enemy, and am I really as misguided as the Bible says I am?

The book of Jonah reminds us that God loves our enemy. The story of the Gospel is forgiveness for one's enemies. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that "yet while we were still sinners Christ died for us."⁶ At the cross God shows us that love for enemy is crucial to God's redemptive plan. I wonder if we respond as Jonah does in different areas of our lives. Are there times when we look at Jesus and say, "Jesus that is great of you to do, but I am not doing that. Jesus it's noble of you to forgive the people who put you on the cross and forgive those who are persecuting you, but I am not doing that."

⁶Romans 5:8

And yet, Jesus announces the kingdom of God is at hand. Through him there is a new way of living offered to humanity, one that is live giving and not life taking. Jonah has no high ground to stand on and we have no high ground to stand on. We do not get to limit God's grace, God's love, God's mercy, or God's redemptive purposes. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, and we all need the saving work of Jesus the Christ. All I have going for me is that God is committed to me, and I must wake up to the fact that God is committed to all people.

This world is full of pain and suffering, and yet, there is one place where the trainwreck of human stupidity and wrongdoing being responded to in kind stops -- the foot of the cross. And those who gather around the cross, those belonging to the flock of Christ, are called to live differently. Not because we think we are better, but because we have been shown grace and compassion. And we have been met by and treated by a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

- What and who is an enemy?

The book of Jonah and chapter 4 in particular deconstructs our concept of what and who an enemy is. Normally, an enemy is an individual or group of people that have wronged you or someone that you care about. And it is okay to struggle to be around certain people. The issue is what you do with that repulsion and emotions.

We tend to paint ourselves as the opposite of the person who has wronged us, and those who wrong us become their actions. When you fall into that trap, you end up with Jonah chapter 4 where he is blind to the fact that the line of good and evil goes right down the middle of himself.

Once the concept of an enemy is fixed, then we can wake up to the fact that the list of contributors to this fallen world includes us too. Every human receives grace and mercy at the cross. It is all or none, and that is the point of the Gospel. It is simply God's gracious, liberal mercy.

How Jonah 4 ends is with a punch. And what you see is that this story is really about God and God's own people. And God is trying to open their hearts to how messed up they are and how much they need God's grace as much as anyone and everyone else.

Youth Activities for Jonah

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A lot of attention in the Jonah story falls on the fish swallowing Jonah, with good reason. But Jonah is not the hero here. (Neither is the fish!) This story is about repentance and redemption. It reminds us that God provides for us and helps us no matter what. No matter how many times we mess things up, He is ready and willing to help us and He lets us try again and again. His plans are good and He lets us be part of them!

Prayer Stations

Set up **prayer stations** around the church, each with a specific theme such as gratitude, forgiveness, guidance, or intercession. Youth can move from station to station, engaging in quiet, reflective prayer about each focus area. Include prompts like, “Think of someone who needs your forgiveness” or “Pray for guidance in a specific challenge.” This allows youth to connect with God in an intentional, reflective manner, fostering inner peace and deepening their relationship with him. Prayer stations can be designed with visuals, scripture references, and tactile items to engage all senses, creating a holistic spiritual experience.

Game: Listening to God

Have students line up at one side of the room. The teacher gives instructions, saying “Teacher Says” as in “Simon Says.” Do the motions as you say the instruction. Every once in a while, do something and give the instruction without saying “Teacher says” first. Anyone who does something without the teacher having said, “Teacher says” has to pretend that they’ve been swallowed by a fish and taken to Nineveh at the other side of the room. You can also give an instruction that doesn’t match your motion to catch kids off guard. Students who are out wait there until the end of the round and then, join back in. The last student in the game becomes the new leader.

Game: Reverse Fishing

Place a large trashcan, bucket, or box at the end of the room. Give students a blanket or towel and an action figure, doll, or stuffed animal. Students try to launch their action figure (Jonah) into the trashcan (fish’s mouth) using only their blanket (waves of the sea).

Game: Obedience Race

Materials needed: Obstacle course setup, blindfolds

Instructions:

1. Set up an obstacle course in an open space using objects like cones, ropes, and chairs.
2. Divide the group into pairs, with one person blindfolded in each pair.
3. The blindfolded person must trust and listen to their partner's instructions to navigate through the obstacle course safely.
4. Time each pair as they complete the course, and the pair with the fastest time wins.

Note: Emphasize the importance of trust, communication, and obedience in successfully completing the challenge.

Game: Repentance Relay

1. Divide the group into two teams and mark out a relay race track.
2. Each team member takes turns running to a designated point and back, carrying a small object that signifies repentance (e.g., a small cross or a Bible).
3. When a team member returns, they hand the object to the next teammate, who then repeats the process.
4. The first team to complete the relay, passing the object through all members, wins the game.

This game encourages teamwork and reminds participants of the importance of repentance as they pass the object representing repentance along the relay.