

Anti-Prophet Jonah 1:1-4:11

Introduction:

Mirror of Scripture: Cinephile. When you watch Star Wars, Lion King, etc., who do you identify with? (If you pick Darth Vader or Mufasa then we need to have a conversation). How do you read the Bible? (e.g., Judas, Disciples, Jesus, Pharisees, etc.). Why I hate my kids sin so much (because I really hate my own). "If Scripture confirms your view of others more than it changes your view of yourself, you're not reading it correctly" (Coley). The Bible is meant to tell us about God and his work in the world, but as it does, it reveals to us our need for him. The Bible is a mirror meant to aid us in the transformation to become like Christ.

Unusual Prophet: Turn of the century theologians, VeggieTales, memorably sang: "Jonah was a prophet (oo-oo!) but he never really got it (sad but true!)."

- Jonah is quite the curveball compared to the rest of the Minor Prophets.
 - (1) Barely any prophecy (5 words of actual prophecy).
 - (2) All narrative (not oracle or vision).
 - (3) Other prophets don't know anything about them (location, family, date, etc.; cf. Obadiah, Joel). Jonah, we know a lot about (date, family, location; cf. 2 Kgs 14).
- Jonah is about the prophet *even more* than it's about the prophecy (one of the most memorable OT stories, popular in the early church, VBS, etc.).
- **Antihero.** *Spoiler alert, Jonah is the bad guy (the prophet is the bad guy).
 - Cf. Jonah to Amos (2 Kings 14) as a prophet during the High Priesthood of **Amaziah** and the reign of **Jeroboam II**. Prophet of the wicked regime (*contra* Amos). Jonah and Amos have opposite messages and opposite allegiances.
- **Upside Down** (a lot like the first people to hear the message of Jesus). Prophet rebels, pagans repent, wicked and powerful King humbles himself, etc.
 - Everything about this story is unlikely (because God's grace is unlikely).

In four scenes (one in each chapter), the prophet Jonah runs away, rebels, and rejects the beauty of God's compassion and the wideness of his grace. It's a call to us to join God in inviting all people to repent and believe.

1. Act 1: Escaping Evangelist (1:1-16)

Simple Command: God gives Jonah a clear and direct command. ¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." The Word of the Lord came: this wasn't a time to pray about it, strategize, or weigh options, it was a call to simple and immediate obedience.

- Delayed obedience is too often disobedience. Too many people want to know the will of God regarding their future (who am I going to marry, what job am I gonna have, etc.) while ignoring what **he has already revealed in his Word**. Are you obeying what God

has already commanded in Scripture? Before you seek the unknown, focus on learning and obeying the known.

Big Problem: The command of God was clear but it wasn't easy. Nineveh was a *great* city

- Nineveh (modern-day, Mosul, northern Iraq). Eastern bank of Tigris River. At the time, the capital and largest city of the Assyrian Empire (prosperous and powerful people, enemies of Israel, notoriously brutal). Jonah prophesying *judgment* in Nineveh like a Jewish Rabbi standing in the streets of Berlin in 1941 and calling the Nazis to repent.
- Jonah was a *good news prophet* (tell Jeroboam what he wanted to hear), now he has to tell bad news (bad news that could *easily* get him killed!).
- But the real problem, we'll soon learn, is that he hates the Ninevites and thinks they don't deserve God's grace.
 - Will you obey God when it's difficult and dangerous? Will you take the gospel to people and places that you don't like or you think don't deserve it?

Opposite: ³ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish... away from the presence of the LORD. Jonah went West when God called him to go East. Tarshish is the farthest place in the known world from Ninevah.

- Rather than obey God (even when it's hard), he ran from God's command. Ultimately he ran from God himself. **Fleeing God's commands is fleeing God.** Too many want God's approval but not obedience to God. Jonah has a big problem with the job he's been given, which means he has a bigger problem with the God who gave it.
 - When you reject God's Word and reject God's plan then you *reject God*.
- "One of the main reasons that we trust God too little is because we trust our own wisdom too much" (Keller). We think we know better than God. We think he should do things differently.
 - Our actions and attitudes often communicate that we believe God doesn't *really* know what he's doing (let me fix that for you God; "I can't believe in a God who").

Get Back Here: God sent a *great* wind to get Jonah (at least to get his attention). This great storm reminds us of the great city and the soon to appear "great fish" (all of which highlight the great sin of Jonah). **God is going to great lengths to pursue Jonah.**

Shocking Response: Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and was fast asleep. The captain said to him, "Why are you asleep?" Get up, call to your god! Jonah tried to sleep through it (the Ostrich approach). "If I ignore it, maybe it'll go away."

- These sailors interrogate Jonah and find out that He is Hebrew, a worshipper of YHWH.
 - Jonah says he fears YHWH but these men actually *act* like it. They realize Jonah has made a huge mistake ("What have you done") because YHWH's reputation has preceded him. **The pagans recognize God more than Jonah does.**
- This is shocking because of the reputation of sailors (there's a reason we say "cuss like a sailor"). These would be rough-around-the-edges "sea-dogs".

- How many in the world look at the church and think, you're not living up to your own beliefs, convictions, and theology? It's a strange moment when those who don't know God fear him more than those that say they do (e.g., we should be leading the way in fighting sexual abuse, racism, greed, etc. but too often we are doing worse than the world; we know better!).
- Ironically, Jonah ran from God to *not* reach pagans (Ninevah) and ended up reaching pagans on this ship
 - They called out to the LORD, they feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

Painful End: God hurled a wind (1:4), the sailors hurled cargo (1:5), and now they hurled Jonah into the sea (1:12, 15). His rebellion has come to an end. This is not him submitting to God but continuing to rebel. He'd rather die than surrender (kinda his thing, cf. ch. 4).

- He thinks he can die in the ocean, that way he doesn't have to go to Nineveh, and the Ninevites won't get to hear God's warning of judgment. He is **obstinate**. So are some of us (e.g., "anything but that").

2. Act 2: Gracious God (1:17-2:10)

Sovereign Lord: ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. God will accomplish his will, you can either join him or fight him. God appointed a fish (1:17), appointed a plant (4:6) and a worm (4:7), scoring east wind (4:8). In spite of Jonah's disobedience, God pursues him.

Attention: Why do whale stomachs happen to good people? Every difficulty is not from sin, but every sin brings difficulty. The consequences of disobedience and sin are an opportunity to turn to God. Three days and three nights in the belly of the fish got Jonah's attention.

- These fish guts are the best thing to happen to Jonah (**not the most comfortable**).
 - This isn't Pinocchio and Gepetto in the whale starting a little fire to get sneezed to safety. This is a suffocating, painful, gooey, mess.
- This would be the perfect example of a "severe mercy," a painful situation meant to get your attention. It hurts to help. It wounds to heal.

Rock Bottom: Jonah is heading toward "rock bottom." He has gone "down" to Joppa, "down" to the ship, "down" into the depths of the ship, "down" into the ocean, and, now, he is in the belly of the fish falling "down" into the deep, belly of Sheol (the grave).

- God will continue to take you to the bottom until you turn and trust him (e.g., construction project through a swamp, putting pilings in but having to keep going to find the bottom).

It's really a **picture of death and resurrection** (Jesus calls his death and resurrection the "sign of Jonah"). ⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶ at 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.

- True salvation is not simply behavior modification or turning a new leaf; it is death to sin and self to find new life in Christ. It is not “my life” with a little Jesus sprinkled in; it’s Jesus’ life in me.
- The upside-down nature of God’s plan continues to shine through. Jonah’s fish grave *isn’t* ultimately his death but his salvation.

Prayer from the Ocean Floor: But “it’s not simply *being* at the bottom that begins to change Jonah but *prayer* at the bottom” (Keller). Rock bottom is only useful when you acknowledge it and respond accordingly.

- Jonah prays to God from a place of weakness, not strength (out of my distress). That’s the kind of prayer God answers. It’s a moment of clarity. ⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
- He has a perspective shift in the presence of God. He’s alone with God and remembers his true nature and character.
- In the pit of despair, the solution to Jonah’s problems is not “find himself” but to “find God.” He didn’t “discover his inner strength” but remembered the character of God. His focus is on God, not his problems.

It’s Not About the Fish: *Side note* It’s not about the fish. It’s about the God who sent the fish. Salvation doesn’t belong to a fish or to Jonah, Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

- A lot of ink has been spilled trying to debunk or defend the possibility of this event really happening. Certainly, crazy things like this have happened. Actual people have been swallowed by fish and survived.
- But even if they haven’t, miracles are miracles for a reason. “If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then this isn’t hard to read literally” (Keller).
- Only two brief verses mention the fish and it is described as a normal, simple fact. Don’t get distracted by the fish. The text assumes the fish.

Mission: The great miracle all along is God’s desire to rescue and redeem the Ninevites through the preaching of this prophet Jonah. This is not about how much he loved Jonah (though he surely did) but how much he loved the Ninevites. **When God sent the fish to rescue Jonah, he was rescuing the hopes of the lost among the nations.**

- Jonah was shown compassion to show compassion. He found hope to give hope.
- God doesn’t just want to save you, he wants to use you.

3. Act 3: Penitent Pagans (3:1-10)

Take 2: The book of Jonah occurs in two halves. Again we see the command of YHWH, the Word of YHWH, the message of warning, pagans responding in worship, etc. The fact that the word of the LORD came to Jonah [a] second time shouldn’t be too quickly ignored.

- We serve a God of second chances. If you’ve been running from God’s call, now’s the time to repent.

- You are not too far gone (Jonah was as far away from God's will as you can imagine, yet God still used him).

Word: Jonah doesn't have to figure out how to cleverly reach these lost people, he simply is commanded to speak the message God gives him (the message that I tell you, according to the word of the LORD). It's a **simple message**, only five words in Hebrew ("Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"). The gospel doesn't have to be complicated.

- You can (1) talk for hours about every sports state and strategy, (2) learn algebra or get advanced degrees, (3) memorize the most complicated song lyrics *then* you can share the gospel.
- You don't have to be able to answer every objection, but it isn't hard to share the truth that God created us to know him, sin separates us from God, and Jesus made a way to God by dying for our sins. All we have to do is turn from our sin and trust Jesus.

You don't need a clever strategy, just an obedient heart.

Surprising Result: The most remarkable thing happened, they *actually* repented. The Word reached the King (living and active). He humbled himself. Everyone humbled themselves (even the animals).

- It's **not presumptuous** but **truly humble**. They don't demand anything of God (as if he has to save them). ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.
- **God saves those we think are too far gone or too wicked.** Who do you think is beyond God's reach? Do you think they can be saved? Who do you hate and think deserves God's judgment? What would it look like to pray for their salvation? (Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, etc.).

Again, these wicked pagans seem to get it more than the prophet Jonah. **Actual repentance, not just lip service.**

- "Jesus came 'to call sinners to repentance.' [Too often] the church is offended that he calls sinners and the world is offended he calls for repentance" (Wax).
- In a twist, the Ninevites are not "overturned" but are turned over to God.

Gospel: Jonah wanted a god who supported his personal and political agenda. He wanted a gospel that justified his prejudice and apathy. He wanted a church that would prop up his preferences. He wanted a theology to rationalize his comfortable lifestyle.

- **The gospel doesn't come to tell us what we want to hear, it gives us the good news we need to hear.**

4. Act 4: Pouting Prophet (4:1-11)

The Truth Comes Out: If we didn't have ch. 4, we'd assume Jonah would be happy about this. But he's not. These are the last people on earth Jonah thinks should be saved. He was angry.

- The truth of Jonah's rebellion is revealed. He didn't want to go to Ninevah because he thought they would kill him but because he didn't think they deserved the opportunity to repent. He knew the warning was unnecessary unless there was a chance of repentance.
- He knew that [God was] gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
 - He is arguing with God about God from God's revealed character. **He doesn't like who God is.** He wants a God that will punish his enemies the way he wants. He wants a God that will sanction his prejudice. It's not that he doesn't know what God is doing, it's that he doesn't like it.
 - When Good News becomes bad news, that's a problem.
- He's so angry he wants to die (it's kind of his go-to move, 4:3, 8, 9).

The Ninevites were the bad guys, the "other," they deserved judgment. They are his enemies. Jonah wants all the grace for himself and his people, but none of it for the Ninevites.

God Teaches a Lesson: Again God tries to get Jonah's attention. Jonah goes and waits, hoping God might still destroy the bad guys. God gives him shade (nice), then God takes the plant away and Jonah pouts again.

- Object lesson: Jonah doesn't deserve this but God gives it, yet he wants the Ninevites not to get grace. **It's all grace.**
- The juxtaposition couldn't be any greater. Jonah is more upset that the plant died than that the Ninevites would die.
 - How many of us love "the plants" in our lives more than the people in our world? **We'd be more upset if our AC went out than someone died without Christ.**
 - Jonah loved the plant because it brought him comfort. He loved himself! Jonah is not the good guy.
 - What right does Jonah have to be angry? God saved him from an ocean grave and gave him a second chance. Jonah has no rights, it's all grace. We don't have any rights before God, we all deserve death but have been given life.
- Jonah didn't want God's grace on God's terms, he wanted it on his.
 - God is showing Jonah that his grace is wider than he imagined and inviting him to be part of sharing it with others.
- Jonah was glad to receive God's grace but not glad to give it. His self-absorption deceived him from understanding his own sin. "People give as much grace as they think they need" (Christina Edmondson). "It is natural to see other people's sins, it is grace to see my own" (Kell).

Conclusion

I'm Looking at the Man in the Mirror: And then Jonah ends—a **cliffhanger**. The question isn't so much how Jonah will respond, but how will you and I? God puts up with the Jonah in all of us. The good news of the wideness of God's mercy is loudly proclaimed and God is inviting us to participate.

- God wants us to see the value of all people and desire that they hear and receive the gift of God's grace in Christ.

Are you a Jonah?: There are lots of ways to be a Jonah

- Maybe you're foolishly running away from God.
- Maybe you selfishly think you know better than God.
- Maybe you ignorantly are holding grudges against your enemies.
 - We won't go where God goes until we love who God loves.
 - And we won't love who God loves until we surrender our hearts, minds, and wills to Christ.
 - We must die to ourselves and trust Christ.

Missionary Heart: But the gospel transforms. And the same gospel that birthed the early church is still at work today. I think of missionaries like **Karen Watson**. A relatively late convert to the faith, Watson sold her house and belongings, quit her job in Bakersfield, CA and joined the International Mission Board (who our church partners with) to go to Iraq as a missionary in the early 2000s. She went to be the hands and feet of Jesus, working on water purification and other projects, and trying to share the love of Jesus with as many as she could. In 2004, her and four other missionaries were ambushed by armed terrorist with AK-47s in Mosul (Nineveh). Karen and three others were killed. She left a letter with her pastors, written one year before she passed:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of death. When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected. His glory my reward. The Missionary Heart: Cares more than some think is wise. Risks more than some think is safe. Dreams more than some think is practical. Expects more than some think is possible. I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience. There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him.