Jonah *Legendary 2: Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

***Jonah and God***Today we are going to continue are look at legendary figures of the Bible by considering the story of Jonah. If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Jonah, which is found approximately in the middle of the scriptures.

Pop quiz. Who is the book of Jonah about? Jonah and...?

It's pretty natural to say Jonah and the whale. That’s how we usually think about it. Jonah and his relationship with this giant fish who swallows him and then spits him back onto shore. It is the most memorable part of Jonah’s story.

But Jonah and the whale is not entirely accurate. It is really a story about Jonah and God.

The main character in the book Jonah, as He is in pretty much all the books of the Bible, is God.

And the book of Jonah is a story intended to help us understand God better. Especially God’s grace.

Jonah's problem in this story is that he wants to benefit from God’s grace, but he wants to limit the extension of that grace to others. He thinks he can keep the blessings of God for himself.

That was kind of a problem for the Israelites throughout the Old Testament: they thought they had a corner on God. It might be a problem for us as well. We might be very comfortable with God’s grace in our own lives but stingy about its application to others.

But it is clear that Jonah does not know God as well as he thinks. The point of this book is to teach Jonah—and the Israelites, and also us—the true heart of God.

***Running from God***Let’s go through the story. Jonah is a book with four chapters. I won’t be able to read the whole story, but I’ll summarize it while highlighting a few verses along the way.

The story starts with God’s instructions to Jonah. **Jonah 1:1-2**:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: **2**“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Jonah, son of Amittai, was a prophet. He’s mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet in the days of King Jeroboam II, which would put him shortly after the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Up to this point his job has been to proclaim God’s word to the people of Israel.

But now, God has a new assignment for him. He’s to go the great city of Nineveh and “preach against it.” Nineveh is the royal city of Assyria. At the time, Assyria was the major superpower of the day and a major threat to Israel. In fact, other prophets, contemporaries of Jonah, were predicting that Nineveh and the Assyrians were going to be the means by which God destroyed Israel (Amos 6:14).

And now, God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh—this great city of his people’s enemy—and preach against it. This would be a little like if God sent a prophet to predict that the United States was about to be defeated by Iran, and then came to you and told you to go to Tehran to preach against it.

Jonah doesn’t want to go. **Verse 3** tells us that Jonah ran away from the Lord and boarded a ship to Tarshish. Nineveh is east. Tarshish is west. On the known maps of the day, these two cities would have been as far apart as possible.

At this point, we are not told exactly why Jonah does not want to go. Is it because these people are the enemy and he is afraid of the reception he will receive? Is it because he doesn’t want to associate with Gentiles? We are not told at this time. The answer is in the back of the book, we’ll find out in a moment.

But things don’t work out the way Jonah had planned. **God sends a Katrina-level storm** at the ship and the sailors panic. They throw overboard everything that isn’t nailed down and the ship is still threatening to founder. They pray to their idols, but get no relief. Eventually, they draw straws to figure out who is responsible for bringing this disaster their way, and Jonah gets the short stick. When the sailors find out Jonah is fleeing from God, they are dismayed. **But Jonah says**:

**12**“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

Here is where we can make our first observation about God’s grace: **God’s grace is not permissive.** Do not confuse God’s grace with permissiveness. Sometimes we act as though God’s willingness to forgive is permission to do whatever we want. “It’s O.K.,” we think, “God will forgive me.”

But in this situation, Jonah is openly defying a direct command from God, and that is not O.K. This storm is sent to change the course of Jonah’s actions. God is going to be gracious to Jonah, but that does not mean his defiance was O.K.

***Can a Man Survive inside the Belly of a Fish***The sailors are reluctant at first to do what Jonah suggests, but when no other solution presents itself they ask for forgiveness and then toss Jonah into the sea.

And it works. The sea becomes calm. The sailors worship. And Jonah is left behind for dead.

And here’s where the famous fish enters the story. **Jonah 1:17**:

**17**Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Now, we need to pause here and ask: could this really happen? Is it really possible for a man to survive inside the belly of a whale?

You have to admit, it seems pretty far-fetched. It happens in cartoons—*Pinocchio* and more recently Nemo’s dad and Dory in *Finding Nemo*—and there are echoes of it in *Moby Dick* and the occasional fisherman’s legend; but scientifically it doesn’t seem at all possible.

It has led a lot of people to conclude that Jonah isn’t meant to be taken as a true story, but more of a short story with spiritual implications—a parable.

I will say that it could be a parable and still have authority in our lives. The ancient Hebrews did not necessarily have a way to indicate if a story was based in fact, the way we would classify stories as either fiction or non-fiction. So it could be a parable, and still have important things to teach us.

But at the same time, it is worth noting that Jesus talks about Jonah, and He treats the story as historical fact, not fiction. **In Matthew 12:39-40** Jesus says:

**39**He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. **40**For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth

If Jesus doesn’t hesitate to believe Jonah’s story, we ought to respect Jesus’ opinion.

And if you ask: how is it possible for a man to survive in the belly of a fish? The answer is: it probably isn’t. Any more than it is possible for a man to spit on some dirt and heal blindness or turn five loaves and two fish into a meal for five thousand or—as Jesus Himself is saying—to stay three days in the grave and live again.

That’s why Jesus calls it a “sign.” It’s a miracle, just like all of those other events. There’s no point in trying to explain it scientifically—it can only have happened with God. Jonah cried for help, and God inexplicably and graciously saved him with a fish.

And here’s my second observation about God’s grace: **God’s grace is surprising.** Jonah is the recipient of miraculous grace, undeserved salvation from God. Jonah chapter 2 is pretty much a Psalm. It is a poetic rendering of Jonah’s prayer as he sank into the depths of the sea.

And one of the things that is clear in Jonah’s prayer is that he deserved to die.

He recognizes that he is experiencing God’s righteous judgment. In **verse 3** he says to God: “You hurled me into the deep.” He recognizes that God has every reason to leave him there, and yet it is the surprising grace of God that leads to his rescue.

In **verse 9** Jonah celebrates this surprising grace of God:

**9**But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
    will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
    I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’”

Jonah is the recipient of God’s grace, and he is happy about it.

***Turn or Burn***But Jonah still has an assignment to complete. God has not let him off the hook. In chapter 3, God instructs Jonah once again to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah obeys. **Jonah 3:3-4**:

**3**Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. **4**Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Now, I want you to try to picture this.

Nineveh is a violent city. It is the chief city of Israel’s scariest enemy. These are the people who are going to invade Israel and knock them off the map.

And Jonah—an Israelite—is supposed to walk in and stop at every street corner and start yelling “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

When Beth and I were in college at UNI there was this guy—we never figured out where he was from—who would show up once a year and stand outside the student union and preach that most everybody there was going to hell. He’d wear this sandwich board sign with messages like “Repent or Die” and “God Hates America” and he’d wave a Bible around and he’d tell us everything that was wrong with America and how God was going to punish us for it. He’d yell at girls who were wearing shorts and call them ugly names and he’d yell at guys with long hair and pretty much everybody else. And if somebody tried to argue with him or tell him to leave he’d get into shouting matches and talk about God’s judgment. There was no love from this guy, no grace, nothing to attract anybody to his version of God.

We called him the “turn or burn” guy, and no Christian on campus wanted anything to do with him.

And that’s how I picture Jonah. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!” That sounds like a turn or burn sermon. Jonah is walking through town pointing out everything that’s wrong with the Ninevites—You’re cheating your neighbor! You’re dressed like a prostitute! You’re a bunch of muggers and killers and thugs!—and he’s saying that God is going to come and send them all to hell.

Turn or burn. Forty more days and Nineveh’s getting turned upside down.

And the thing about the guy on campus was that you got the sense that he was putting the emphasis on the burn. That he was secretly—or not so secretly--taking delight in the idea that all those college kids were headed for hell. And that’s the way I picture Jonah: “You rotten Ninevites, you’re about to get exactly what you deserve! It’s fire and brimstone for you! God’s going to get you!”

But here is the shocking thing about Jonah’s sermon: it works! **Verse 5:**

**5**The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

This is probably the biggest miracle in the book of Jonah. Bigger than the storm or the sailors or even the fish. The Ninevites—the wicked, evil, violent neighbors of Israel—believe God. And they repent. They stop their violence and they change their ways.

That’s a miracle. God put faith into the hearts of Ninevites that only deserved a Sodom and Gomorrah level judgment.

And here’s the third thing for us to see about God’s grace: **God’s grace is generous.** The heart of God is to relent. God wants to pour out grace. When God sends a “turn or burn” message, the emphasis for Him isn’t on “burn” it’s on “turn”. That’s what He wants. He wants us to turn away from wickedness, He wants to pour out His compassion on us.

In fact, we should say that God is more serious about relenting than we are about repenting. **2 Peter 3:9** says that God is “patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

God loves to hold back His righteous wrath—and never forget, the Ninevites deserved wrath, and so do we—God loves to hold back His righteous wrath and reveal His divine compassion.

That’s what the Cross is all about. It’s the demonstration of the justice of God against sin, but it’s also the demonstration of His love to His people and His grace held out to those who will repent and believe.

God’s grace is generous. God wants to relent.

***Angry About Grace***But the thing is: Jonah isn’t all that happy that God decided to spare Nineveh. In fact, as the Ninevites repent and God relents, Jonah resents. **Chapter 4, verses 1-3:**

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. **2**He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. **3**Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Now the truth comes out. Remember how I said that Jonah’s motivation for running away in chapter 1 was unclear?

Now Jonah tells us why he didn’t want to go to Nineveh. It wasn’t because he was scared of the Ninevites. It wasn’t because he was embarrassed to be standing in front of these strangers with his sandwich board signs proclaiming the word of the Lord. It wasn’t because he was afraid to be the bearer of bad news.

It was because he knew that if the Ninevites repented God would have mercy on them. And. He. Didn’t. Want. That.

Jonah didn’t like the Ninevites. They were Israel’s enemies. They were violent and aggressive and mean. They’d been living as far away from God as possible, and Jonah knew they deserved to die. And that’s what he wanted. He didn’t want God to be gracious. And so he didn’t want to go to Nineveh because he was afraid something precisely like this would happen.

The second half of verse 2 is an amazing verse. In any other context this would be a profound description of God. “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” This is the kind of verse we base praise choruses on. This is the sort of description we usually use to exalt and glorify God.

But here, it’s something Jonah is mad at God for. Can’t you just picture Jonah shaking his fist at God: “You’re gracious and compassionate! And I’m mad about it! You are abounding in love, and it makes me so angry I could just die!”

It’s a ridiculous picture, but there it is. Here’s the fourth thing we need to reckon with about God’s grace, and probably the main point of the whole book: **God’s grace can be vexing.** Sometimes, we find that while we enjoy God’s grace in our own lives, we resent it when it is given to others.

This story calls us to examine ourselves: do we ever become angry because God shows grace to someone else?

I mean, if we’re honest, it’s not that hard to identify with Jonah here. He knows all about the Ninevites, these are bad people. They’ve been beating on the Israelites for decades, taking advantage and lording it over them. They’re godless, idol-worshiping pagans. They deserve judgment. And now God is going to spare them just because they’ve said they were sorry?

Aren’t there certain groups of people that we’d rather just see God punish? Terrorists, child abusers, pornographers? Abortionists, rapists, greedy corporate honchos? It’s a lot easier to think about them getting what they deserve than to imagine God graciously getting a hold of them and changing their ways and welcoming them into His Kingdom.

What about your personal enemies? People who have crossed you, or hurt you. People who have taken advantage of you. How would you feel if God showed grace to people like that?

The fact of the matter is, it can be hard for us to see God showing grace to people we don’t think deserve it.

***Cul-de-sacs or Conduits?***God isn’t quite done with Jonah yet. The book ends with a strange little object lesson on grace. As Jonah sits on a hill overlooking Nineveh, waiting for the fire and brimstone to fall, God causes a plant to spring up and give Jonah shade. Jonah is grateful for the plant. But the next day God sends a worm to kill the plant and sends a hot wind to make Jonah miserable.

Jonah has two responses: he is angry that his shade is gone , and he evidently makes out to God that he pities the plant.

And now God has him where he wants him. "You pity the plant, Jonah? You didn't labor over it; you didn't make it grow; it came and went in one night. But, Jonah, I did labor over Nineveh, I did make it grow, and I've been at work on Nineveh not one night but for years.” **Verse 11,** the final verse of the book, God says:

**11**And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Ultimately, the book of Jonah is a missionary book. It is about God’s compassion for those who do not know Him yet. God doesn’t want to come in judgment, He wants to pour out His mercy.

And Jonah needs to learn that. And so do we.

The surprising thing about the book of Jonah is that it does not end. The final verse is a question, and it does not get answered. The book ends with Jonah on the hilltop with his withered plant and his worm contemplating God’s words. We don’t know whether Jonah ever comes around.

But it forces the reader to answer God’s question: “Should he not be concerned about that great city?” How do you feel about God’s grace?

Do you feel that it is right that God pours out grace on you but you resent it when He shows it to others? Or do you want to be a part of sharing that grace with the world?

This is the Jonah question: Are you a cul-de-sac for God’s grace, or a conduit?

A cul-de-sac has no outlet. God’s grace pours into your life, and you enjoy it and benefit from it. You’re glad it’s there, but you do nothing to pass it on.

A conduit, on the other hand, lets grace flow right through. You realize that God is blessing you so that you can bless others. Instead or resenting God’s grace in the lives of others you celebrate it, because you recognize in it a reminder of how gracious God has been to you.

We don’t know what Jonah finally decided. It’s an open-ended book. Maybe he came around, maybe he didn’t. But what happened to Jonah isn’t nearly as important as what happens to you. How do you answer the Jonah question? How do you feel about God’s grace? Are you ready to pass it on?