

Jonah: Pursuit, Preaching, Providence (and Promise)

By Kevin Gladding

The book of Jonah is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, but it is often relegated to children's books and Sunday School colouring pages. Jonah seems to have lost his significance among more "mature" readers of Scripture. Yet, Paul says "All Scripture is God-breathed" and "profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16-17), which includes Jonah! In fact, we find in Jonah many of the same doctrines that Paul teaches. I can't cover them all here, but if you will permit the standard Presbyterian 3-alliterative-points schema, I would summarize Jonah under the headings of pursuit, preaching, and providence.

Jonah teaches us that God pursues sinners. Every (human) character in the story is an obvious sinner and, in need of salvation. Jonah, one of God's people *and* one of God's prophets (2 Kings 14:23-27) rejects the Word of the Lord and rebels against God's directives! For his sin, he ends up in a fish's belly! The sailors, although more noble and altruistic than Jonah (see 1:6, 13), are idolatrous pagans (1:5), having no knowledge of the "God of heaven and earth, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). And, of course, the Ninevites are a people whose "evil has come up before" God (1:2). It is an all-star cast of sinners!

Yet, God pursues each of them! He pursues His prophet down to Joppa, into the ship, into the sea, and into the fish until the rebel Israelite exclaims, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (2:9). God pursues the pagan sailors until *they* obey God's prophet. They are saved and offer praise to God, with "sacrifice" and "vows" (1:16), playing the part that Israel and Jonah should have played. And, God pursues the Ninevites too, enabling them to repent and find the Lord to be who He is: "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (4:2; cf. Ex. 34:6; Jer. 18:7-8; Joel 2:12-14).

Each character deserves God's judgment, but each receives God's grace. And isn't that what Paul proclaims (2 Tim. 1:15; Rom. 5:6-8)? None were seeking God (Rom. 3:11); His prophet was actually running from Him. But God sought them. That is our reality too. We were all "fulfilling the desires of the flesh" (Eph. 2:3), until God called us. Praise the Lord!

Alongside the pursuit of God for sinners, is the potency of God's Word to sinners. Despite Jonah's reticence, it is only through the prophetic word that they are saved! The prophet rejected God's call to go and "cry out" in Nineveh, but he ends up delivering a saving word to pagans anyway. And when they obey, they are saved.

Likewise, it is the word of the Lord that saves Jonah. Not only are Jonah's final words from within the fish the words of David (Ps. 3:8), but it is God's word to the fish that moves Jonah from having the "bars [of the earth] closed upon [him]" to having his feet "upon the dry land" (2:6, 10), albeit in a rather unsightly manner. The Word that Jonah rejected is the same Word that saves him!

And of course, Nineveh's repentance is in response to the preached Word (3:4). In Hebrew, that sermon is only *five words* long. But the word of God, which does not return to Him void (Is. 55:11), brings the hearts of violent idolaters to repentance. The wordplay here is worth noting: God does not "overturn" them, but by His Word, "turns them around," away from their evil.

This too is encouraging! The same word that is "profitable" is "powerful" for salvation, (Rom. 1:16). And because the Word of God is unchanging (Is. 40:8), it possesses the same efficacy

now as it did then. What a comfort that is. It was not Jonah's cheery disposition that compelled a change. And it is not our clever turn of phrase, rhetorical skill, or streamlined program that saves. It is the word of the Lord, applied to the heart by the Spirit of God. That is all we need, for that is all there is.

Finally, the story of Jonah displays the providence of God. In every scene, God, in His holiness, wisdom, and power, is "preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions" (to cite the Shorter Catechism). From the storm that God "hurls" (1:4) to the fish He "appoints" (1:17), everything in the story moves as God directs: wind and worm, sea and sun, prophet and pagan. The purposes of God prevail, over the rebellion of people, the idols of nations, and the intentions of kings.

What a timely encouragement for us! Nothing is outside His control, or operating apart from His plan: not nations, governments, storms, or viruses. We do not always understand *how* He is doing things (Rom. 11:33-35), but we know *what* He is doing. In the midst of the varied circumstances of life, God is working out His perfect purposes to the "good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

If you'll permit me to sneak in a fourth "P," the story ends with "Promise" that directs us to Christ. The final, rhetorical question of God to Jonah is a question brimming with promise – a promise that God *does care* for sinners, that He *will continue* to pursue them. And indeed, He did – and does! He has given Jesus His Son (Jn. 3:16). The Gospel is not that God sent the Son so that He could love people. The Gospel is that God "so loved that He gave His Son."

And so the final question is cloaked in the great promise that is fulfilled in Jesus, the greater and better prophet than Jonah (Mt. 12:41), who would go "down" not in rebellion, but in obedience to seek and save the lost (Lk. 19:10). Jonah deserved judgment, but Jesus, the Righteous One, would bear the judgment we deserved. Jonah went down to the depths for his own sin; Jesus went to the grave to atone for the sins of all who would call upon Him by faith. Jonah foreshadows the saving power and compassion of God; Christ completes it. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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