Jonah and the Great Plant

David Flatt

Everyone is familiar with the Old Testament book of Jonah. God called Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Jonah did not want to do this. He had been prophesying against foreign countries. He had been calling for the expanse of Israel's territory (2 Kings 14:23-25). Now, God wanted him to have compassion on a foreign, enemy nation: Assyria. Jonah wanted no part of this. Instead, he tried to run from God. The city of Nineveh was west, but Jonah traveled east. He got on a boat headed to Tarshish: the ends of the earth (i.e. a town on the southern tip of Spain).

While on this voyage, the ship was nearly overtaken in a storm. Realizing he was to blame for the storm, Jonah had the men throw him overboard to calm the sea. Hesitantly, the men listened to Jonah and threw him into the sea. God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah. After being in the fish for three days and three nights, the fish spit Jonah back onto dry land. This strange event was foreshadowing an even stranger future event: the resurrection of the Messiah from the dead.

The second chapter of the book records Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great fish. Jonah described being taken prisoner to the depths of death but being brought back to life by the Lord. Many years later, Jesus would mention Jonah and this great fish in a veiled reference to His resurrection (Matt. 12:40). While Jonah's prayer is theologically fascinating, there is an important missing element: an apology.

Of course, most people are familiar with this part of the book of Jonah. This account certainly captures our imaginations. Regrettably, the rest of the story is often ignored or forgotten. Yet, there are critical lessons to be learned.

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

After Jonah was given new life, he went to Nineveh. He warned the citizens of impending doom. The sum of Jonah's message was, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The Hebrew word translated "overthrown" has an important meaning. The word can literally mean to "turn over." Yet, the word can also mean to "change" or "convert." Nineveh would be overthrown, but not how Jonah had anticipated.

Surprisingly, the king of Nineveh led the people to repent. The third chapter of Jonah closes by saying, "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" (Jonah 3:10).

What an unlikely outcome! Most prophets were met with rejection and death for their messages. Elijah fled for his life after the contest at Mt. Carmel. Jeremiah was thrown into a pit. Not so with Jonah. The people he preached to listened and obeyed. This must have been wonderful for Jonah, right? Wrong!

The fourth chapter begins by saying, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:1-3).

Jonah was angry. He was angry the people of Nineveh repented. He was angry at God for being gracious, merciful, and loving towards the people of Nineveh. Jonah's anger had consumed him. In a fit of self-righteousness, he asked God to kill him. Jonah left Nineveh to watch and see what would become of it.

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While Jonah was on the outskirts of Nineveh, God caused a plant to spring up and give him much needed relief from the sun. The next day, God caused a worm to eat the plant. Exposed to the elements, the wind and sun to beat down on Jonah. Once again, Jonah asked God to kill him. However, God was not done with Jonah.

God said to Jonah, "…Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:9-11).

Jonah was hardhearted and full of hate. He had more love for a plant than human life. The big question is, why. Like most Israelites, Jonah was inflated with pride. He thought Israel was God's favorite nation. Jonah was consumed by ethnic supremacy. Division along ethnic lines was typical in the ancient world. The story of Jonah gives us insight into the narrow-minded world-view of an average Israelite and God's rejection of it (see Rom. 2). In reality, Israel was no better than their enemies. Jonah was no better than the people of Nineveh. Both needed God's grace to be saved.

Conclusion

The book of Jonah closes with God asking Jonah a question: *should I not pity Nineveh*. Jonah does not answer. Why does the book end with an unanswered question? This is an important feature of the writing style of this book. If we speculate about Jonah's potential answer to God's question, we will miss the point.

The question is not directed to Jonah as much as the question is directed to us, the readers. Jonah hated his enemies. God loved them. Jonah hated the people of Nineveh. God loved them. How, then, should God's view of the Ninevites impact how we view our enemies or people who are different from us?

Our ethnicity, race, nationality, education, or social class does not grant superiority in our standing with God or man. Every human being has been made in the image of God; therefore, is owed love (Rom. 13:8). This is how God views the human family and how we must view one another. We must reject the small-minded bigotry that is all too common to man and embrace the love of a God who desires all men to be saved (John 3:16; Rom. 1:16; 2 Pet. 3:9).

The story of Jonah and the great fish is important. But, so too is the story of Jonah and the great plant.