

Reading: Jonah 1:1-17

Theme: The Angry Prophet!

Most people know the story of Jonah: seen as a whale of a tale, a bit of a fishy fairy tale, a nice story, but we can miss its significance and importance. It is a relevant book for us at so many levels, not just as a book in the Bible, but for our own individual lives, for the life of the church. It is a historical book, even if it is in the Bible's prophetic section - Jesus refers to it as history. It is to stir and challenge us to examine our lives, motives and desires, but I pray it will also move our hearts to appreciate our God and the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus. Let's see 5 things about this book as an introduction to it:

1. Context.

This is the historical bit, but for those who don't like history, this point will soon be over! Yet we need this to help us realise where Jonah's racial prejudice and nationalism came from. We are back in the mid-700s BC and Jonah had been used to preach a message of great hope in 2 Kings 14:25 where he spoke of the great expansion of Israel, of a coming time when they'd never had it so good. That was a long way off and at the time of the events of the book of Jonah, Israel had it rough and the good times were still far ahead. Their oppressor in Jonah's lifetime was Assyria, Aram (NIV) and its capital was Nineveh and they were being used to punish Israel, the 10 northern tribes, because of their idolatry and wandering away from God.

Both Israel and Judah had lost their way; had wandered and were wandering from God; God's judgement was on them as He used Assyria to chastise them. Jonah was sent to proclaim judgement on Israel's oppressors - surely a job any patriotic Jew would willingly do, but Jonah didn't want to do it! We'd think he would have been delighted to do so, but not so! For he was:

2. Contrary.

Jonah knew the corrupt state of Israel and yet the Lord, through him, had promised blessing on Israel. Jonah knew God was the God of grace and mercy, which was great news for Israel, but Jonah had to go out of Israel (*the only prophet sent to prophesy in and to a Gentile, pagan land*) and Jonah suspected God was up to some surprising good to Nineveh! Basically, Jonah didn't want the enemies of his people to have any good, but only destruction. Yet God was God, and He was the sovereign God who was in control of events not only in Israel, in Judah, the whole world and even Nineveh. Jonah didn't like what God may do with Nineveh and he was contrary to God's purposes and plans, we can go so far as to say he was angry with God.

Have I said too much? Was Jonah really an angry man, an angry prophet? I feel he was, because I have met Christians who are angry with God - usually secretly, but it spills out in various ways such as "*Why did God let this happen? Why has my marriage gone wrong? Why did I marry the wrong person? Why didn't He help me in...? Why am I ill?*" These and many more are hung onto - not as passing or unresolved questions, but in a resentment that is hung onto and becomes not a passing thing, but a settled trait and disposition in their lives. They look back in anger at what has happened. Yet such ones are believers, will own that God is sovereign, He is in control and they know that one day all will make sense and they will praise God for the genius of His sovereignty, but in their daily lives they rage against His sovereignty being exercised in a way they do not approve of. We can all do that and it may embitter us and produce in us an ongoing anger against God.

We are to be careful not to have this develop as a disposition, a character trait in our lives. It is sin, it is hypocrisy - for we say that we bow to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, but we demand He does things our way and we resent, are angry when He sovereignly acts in ways that we do not approve of, could never understand. Here was Jonah's problem; his anger and contrary nature. In his anger, contrariness, Jonah didn't see that God had every right to treat **Israel** as Jonah wanted Nineveh treated! Our anger, resentment give us blind spots, we excuse those we like, may even excuse ourselves of what we would condemn in others. Yet we see God was showing His:

3. Consistency.

God is always consistent for He is faithful to all He says - whether promises of blessings, or threats of judgement. In this book we will note God's consistency. It is easy to be side tracked by this nice story and wonder about being in the belly of a fish, or if it was a whale, to be vomited up etc. We can be side tracked by such and miss the much more important point of God being consistent with His promise and the burden He has to keep that promise! What promise am I on about? We see it as God promised Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In NT it is revealed as God saving people from every tribe, tongue and nation. God would do this through the Lord Jesus, the Seed and the One Jonah prefigured.

In OT, God's covenant people Israel, were to be a light and a witness to the Gentiles, to show the wonder of having God as their God and living in His ways. In this book we will see how Jonah failed God, but he was not on his own - as the whole nation had done that and were suffering the consequences. Jonah and the Israelites had confused being the elect, the covenant people of God, with being the elite of God. This led them to be smug,

exclusive and instead of reaching out, being a witness to the nations, they avoided such and felt better than the pagan Gentiles around them; felt these pagans deserved God's judgement. What a sad situation Israel and also Judah had come to.

This attitude challenges us; we are post Christ's coming to earth, Calvary and Pentecost. We have been given a mission as individuals and as a church to present our Saviour by our lives, words and witness. We cannot duck out of that; we cannot withdraw and isolate ourselves in a holy huddle or a holy club. We are to be those who seek to be salt and light in the world - in contact with people in real life situations. We are to be a people who have a love and compassion for those around us who are lost. We are to know the love of our God and Saviour so much, that our lives would reflect His heart of love and compassion for those around us. Do we as individuals, or as a church show God's heart for the lost? Or have we Jonah's heart?

This book of Jonah is one of the 39 books in OT and the last 17 are prophetic books, maybe not read often by Christians, especially the last 12 - called the Minor Prophets, while the other five are the Major Prophets. They are not minor in importance, but in length. Originally in the Hebrew OT these 12 books were written on 1 scroll and viewed as one prophetic book in 12 parts. In the 12 of these books, time after time, it is revealed that the Lord keeps His promises - whether promises and pledges of blessings, or of justice and divine judgement. The book of Jonah does this and shows God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. God is consistent; He always is and will always be so. He is faithful and every promise of His word is true. Do we realise that? His promises of salvation are sure and trustworthy, but so are His threatenings of judgement. We need to go and make the promises

of salvation ours in Christ and not have His judgement waiting for us. We will see of God's consistency and now we see:

4. Contrasts.

This book has many contrasts; even its structure shows us this. As a book it can be divided into 2 main sections - ch1 and 2, then ch3 and 4 - each starting with the word of the Lord coming to Jonah (1:1, 3:1) and yet each of these sections show contrasts **1. Contrasts in the commissions** – 1^{stly} to run away, 2^{ndly} to go to Nineveh. **2. Contrast in the consequences of Jonah's actions** - as both are followed by a word of salvation (1:17, 3:10). **3. Contrast in the reaction to God's saving works** - gratitude (ch2) and angry bitterness (ch4).

Jonah's anger spills over and his hypocrisy shows - he was disobedient and yet rejoiced when mercy was shown to him, but when Nineveh gets mercy, he quickly boils over in the heat of the desert. Yet neither deserved any grace or mercy. How do we react in situations to people? Remember the Lord Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer "*Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors*" - a challenging prayer and especially as we note Jesus' comments on it a few verses later in Matthew 6:14-15 – challenging verses which search us to our innermost beings – is our repentance proved, validated and shown in our willingness to forgive others and not to hang onto such wrongs? This is not always easy to do, especially as some will provoke us many times. We'll see Jonah knew forgiveness and restoration, but he not only refused to forgive these enemies, but he didn't want God to do so either! Jonah would witness the sovereign Lord working in a way he did not approve of and he was boiling hot angry at the love and mercy of God shown to Nineveh! Sadly, how hard and dark hearted God's own people can be!

There are other contrasts in this book - Jonah was a prophet = a man who stood in the presence of the Lord and yet he wanted to run away from Him; Jonah owns God as sovereign of the sea to the sailors and yet he had tried to escape God on the sea! He knew God and yet slept in the storm; knew God answered prayer and yet pagans had to tell him to pray and it is they who make the movement towards God and not Jonah. In Nineveh the call to prayer comes from the pagan king and not from the prophet of God. The pagan sailors did not want Jonah to die, but Jonah had no qualms about demanding that all of Nineveh be destroyed. We see the wind, waves, fish, plant and worm all obeying God, but God's servant Jonah does not! What a plonker, a failure Jonah is; yet God used him in an amazing way - the crew were saved, his short sermon message in Nineveh caused the whole city to repent, but even after such success Jonah is angry!

Ours is to trust and obey, to be where God would have us be and His purposes are not stopped or spoiled by our failures, mistakes, defiance or disobedience. Yes, we may miss out on many joys, blessings, but God's plans and purposes will not fail. We are not to fight against God or we will lose out. The greatest contrast in this book is that it ends with no conclusion or resolution and we are left dangling as to what then happened... then what? This strange ending forces us to examine ourselves - would we frown on the mercy of God if our enemies were saved? Or would we be involved in showing and sharing the gospel of Christ to them? In this book we will also see:

5. Centres.

This whale of a tale, this fishy story is not to be treated as a fairy tale, for it takes us away from Jonah and leads, points us to and centres us on the Lord Jesus in so many ways. At the end of John 7 we see Pharisees, angry because Jesus was not arrested; they

spoke of the people's ignorance because they called Jesus a prophet and Nicodemus questioned their attitude and in v52 *"They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.""* Their hatred and rage against Jesus had made them forget that 1 prophet had come from Galilee – Jonah - as we see from 2 Kings 14:25 - he came from Gath Hopher, some 3 miles north of a little place called Nazareth. It is interesting that Jonah was the only prophet Jesus mentioned as foreshadowing His own prophetic ministry!

Jonah does prefigure Jesus - Jonah revealed God's word, but Jesus is the final revelation of God, He is the Word. Surprisingly we will see Jonah offered his life for what he wrongly believed would be for the salvation of his people, but Jesus would be the ultimate sacrifice for enemies to become the people of God. Jonah experienced death, burial and resurrection in type, but Jesus experienced real death, real burial and a glorious, wonderful real resurrection.

Even in his failure, Jonah centres us on Jesus. Jonah as a man of God fell miserably short of reflecting the love of God and in this account, written we assume by Jonah, he does not appear to overcome his bigotry and anger. How would the world be saved if even God's prophet would not tell of God, of His judgement, of His grace and mercy? Jonah failed to show the missionary, the outreaching heart of God. How would God's promises be fulfilled if Jonah is the best God has and could send? Jonah failed, Israel failed, could there be anyone else to send? Thankfully yes, God sent the perfect One, the perfect Israelite, the perfect man, the perfect prophet.

The NT opens up with the birth of a baby and we read in Luke when He was taken to the Temple, old Simeon takes Him in his

arms and praises God saying *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, **a light for revelation to the Gentiles** and for glory to your people Israel."* (Luke 2:29-32) When Jesus grew up Matthew 4:12ff tells us of the beginning of His ministry and it centres on the good news going to those in darkness in and around Galilee of the Gentiles. Towards the end of His ministry Gentiles (Greeks) want to speak to Him and Jesus spoke of being lifted up and drawing all men to Himself. On the day of Pentecost, Peter picks up on another Minor Prophet – Joel and spoke of God pouring out His Spirit on all flesh - Gentiles included.

Israel and Jonah's failures showed the need of God to send another. Thankfully God did and what a One He sent, the most excellent prophet, the one who is God the Son in human flesh; who not only revealed the salvation heart of God in sending heaven's best to save sinners the world over, but was the One who would lay down His life to save them and bring them to God.

To Jonah we can only say thank you. To Jonah's God - what praise and words can we use to thank Him? To the one Jonah prefigured - here we have to be speechless as we try to adore this One; for the Lord Jesus is altogether lovely and shows us perfectly the heart of God. I pray we would all know personally His heart of love toward us and that we would then willingly show that heart of love to others in the way that we live for Him and tell of Him too.