



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 9 Issue 38

October 30, 2010

The Book of Jonah, an Introduction

When we think of the book of Jonah we immediately think of a whale. Don't we? The Prophet Jonah is called by God unto a ministry that the prophet didn't want. So, Jonah rebelled against the Lord and so boarded a ship to travel away from God and His calling. But God wouldn't give up so easily. So He sent a storm against the ship in which Jonah sailed; the gale was so big it threatened the crew. In order to save their ship, the sailors tossed Jonah overboard.

Yet Jonah didn't drown, for God sent a large whale which gobbled up Jonah and so preserved him alive. At the end of three days, the whale spit Jonah back on land where he proceeded to fulfill the original calling which God had placed on his life. And so is the understanding of many when it comes to this prophecy! Yet I would remind you, with G. Campbell Morgan, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God." (Allen, 1976, p. 192)

The message of this prophecy has been missed by so many because they are preoccupied by the whale; which really wasn't a whale but a large fish. In fact, liberals and skeptics alike have rejected this book simply on account of this.

Jonah 1:17, "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."

Now for the sake of the message of Jonah, it might be tempting to concede to the liberal and skeptic at this point: *Fine, take v. 17 out of the book. But don't take from this book its message!* Yet to do this is to forfeit the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture and so the validity not just of Jonah, but the entire Bible. Eugene Merrill wrote this:

If one regards Jonah as anything other than historical narrative for whatever reason, it becomes difficult if not impossible to regard anything in the Old Testament as historical. (Merril, 1997, p. 87)

Christ's Teaching and Confession

We see this from Christ's teaching and confession. In Christ's teaching in John Christ said this:

John 10:35b, "...Scripture cannot be broken."

The implication is that you cannot accept the validity of God's word in a piece-meal way, like at a cafeteria: *"I'll take a little of Genesis, some of the Psalter, and most of the Gospels, but I'll pass on all the rest!"* Either the Bible is the word of God or it is not. Accordingly Christ said this:

Matthew 5:18-19a, "...truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. [In other words, you cannot accept part of the Bible as being God's word. It stands or falls as a whole. Christ continued...] Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven..."

We do not have the option to accept Jonah as God's word, all except for Jonah 1:17. The Doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture as presented by the Bible won't allow it! In fact did you know that Jesus Himself accepted Jonah 1:17 as nothing less than the word of God.

We see it in Christ's confession.

Matthew 12:38-40, "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"

Accordingly in our study of this book we are going to move beyond the question of the validity of Jonah 1:17; Christ accepted it; that settles it. And we are going to move on to the larger, more important question:

- What is the message of Jonah?

- Is this message still relevant today?
- And if it is, how do we apply it?

We only are going *to begin* addressing these questions as we endeavor first to get acquainted with the book.

The Prophet, Date, Religious Setting

We begin our examination of the historical context of the book of Jonah in 2 Kings 14. This passage was given to introduce us to the wicked and evil reign of the northern King of Israel, Jeroboam II, the thirteenth king who reigned from 793-753 BC. So from our study of Joel we move forward in time about fifty years. And instead of Judah as the origin of the prophecy, we are now looking at the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam II was Israel's greatest king being credited for having ushered the Northern Kingdom into its golden age. Under his regency, the nation enjoyed a sovereignty and independency which it had never had nor would ever have again. Like his father before him (Jehoash), Jeroboam II carried out a policy of aggressive expansion such that he was able to restore Israel's boundaries to what they were under Solomon! He was a gifted administrator who assumed power at a time when the pagan nations surrounding Israel either were weak¹ or preoccupied² with other matters. As such Israel at this time (as well as Judah) enjoyed a level of prosperity it had only known during the reign of Solomon.

Now with prosperity typically comes compromise. And such was the case in Israel. During this time the covenant ethic of love for the brethren in which the nation cared for the weak and helpless was tossed out the window. Luxury and false worship became the norm such that societally the nation became characterized by:

- Extreme wealth and poverty (Amos 2:6-7)- and hence a powerful upper class and a struggling lower class.
- Empty religious ritual (Amos 5:21-24; 7:10-17).
- A sense of false security (Amos 6:1-8).

During this time God sent multiple prophets to the land, one of which was Jonah.

2 Kings 14:23-25, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, *and reigned* forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin [this would be in reference to the false system of worship which Jeroboam I erected in Israel to keep the Northern Kingdom from rejoining the Southern Kingdom on account of the temple]. He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah [the Dead Sea], according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke THROUGH HIS SERVANT JONAH THE SON OF AMITTAI, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher."

This passage tells us a couple things about the Prophet Jonah. Not only was his ministry directed at Nineveh (as the book of Jonah indicates), he also was called to minister to the people of God! In fact Jeroboam II's success was here predicted by Jonah on account of the incredible bond that existed in the covenant between God and His people (2 Kings 14:26-27).

Furthermore, we learn from this text something that is not stated in the book of Jonah. The prophet was from Gath-hepher which was five miles northwest of Mount Tabor in Israel. Accordingly, Jonah was an Israelite through and through. Being part of a nation which at the time was one of the most powerful kingdoms in the region (and from the perspective of its citizen's, the world), as we'll see Jonah couldn't help but feel a sense of national pride on account of his heritage.



It is not my plan to burden you with arguments concerning the dating of Jeroboam's conquest of Hamath and Damascus as referenced in 2 Kings 14.³ However it is important to note that scholarship places this victory around 773 BC. As Jonah was well-known at this time by his countrymen, we assume that the prophecy of Jonah therefore was written prior to this date at a time when the city of Nineveh reflected the state of affairs described in the book of Jonah. That being the case, we place the events of Jonah around 780 B.C.

Now as the focus of Jonah concerns itself NOT with Israel and its many abuses (Amos and Hosea are going to address these), BUT with the wickedness and rebellion of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, we need to know a little about the Assyrians and Nineveh. The land which some day would be called Assyria was inhabited from early times. In fact the forefathers of this empire were highly influenced by the Sumerians, the Chaldeans/Babylonians, and Egypt. During the era of Saul and David Assyria was a nation, but it was preoccupied with war on many fronts. This allowed Saul and David a large amount of freedom in their efforts at establishing the Kingdom of Israel.

Fast forward the clock about 200 years and Palestine began feeling the threat of this nation. For example, during the regency of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) Ahab/Jezebel were forced to send soldiers to fund the Assyrian army in 853 BC. Jehu was forced to pay him tribute in 841 BC.

Yet with the death of Shalmaneser III, Assyria fell into decline. The next few kings⁴ spent most of their resources and efforts seeking to preserve the wealth and grandeur of the nation such that once again Palestine was free to develop as it wished (which is why Jeroboam II was able to grow the nation). And as witnessed throughout the history of God's people, the wealth and affluence which Assyria had enjoyed resulted in severe internal strife. Oppression and abuse became the norm. A large chasm arose between the "haves" and the "have nots." Social justice was thrown out the window with the strong preying on the weak. Violence, abuse, and destruction were everywhere. And God was not pleased! Did you get that? The pagan nation of Assyria was trampling underfoot their own weak and helpless, and this moved God to anger (Jonah 3:2, 4)!

Turn with me to Amos (another prophet sent to Israel around this time). Consider the problem

that God had with the pagan nations surrounding Israel and Judah at the time.

Amos 1:3, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they threshed Gilead with *implements* of sharp iron."

In other words, they attacked and killed many innocent people with swords, rakes, and hatchets.

Amos 1:6, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of Gaza and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they deported an entire population to deliver *it* up to Edom."

Here Gaza benefited from a slave trade!

Amos 1:9, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of Tyre and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they delivered up an entire population to Edom and did not remember *the* covenant of brotherhood."

It just wasn't Gaza, Tyre got into the act. But their acts were more despicable. For when it came to selling slaves to Edom, they attacked, conquered, and so captured a people-group who were distant relatives!

Amos 1:11, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of Edom and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because he pursued his brother with the sword, while he stifled his compassion; his anger also tore continually, and he maintained his fury forever."

Edom raised the ire of God because they did not act with grace and compassion toward a people group with whom they were related.

Amos 1:13, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of the sons of Ammon and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their borders.'"

For the sake of growth, Ammon did not act with grace toward the pregnant women of the nation which bordered them. Instead, they ruthlessly tore their bellies open. In and through all these verses, what was God's problem with these pagan nations, nations which did NOT enjoy a national covenant with God? The problem was that they trampled underfoot "brotherly love" kindness, compassion, grace, and mercy.

All this serves as the background to The Problem which the ministry of Jonah was intended to confront; the abuse of the weak, poor, and disadvantaged amongst the Gentiles! Shalmaneser's decree to the nation in response to Jonah's prophecy included this statement:

Jonah 3:8, "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way AND from the violence which is in his hands."

From this verse we see the issue behind the ministry and prophecy of Jonah. It wasn't the many egregious sins which someday would characterize this nation, but the lack of brotherly love and care for one another! Ironically, Jonah/Israel struggled here such that the book of Jonah is as much about the sin of Nineveh as it was the sin of Jonah/Israel. And with this we are brought to a very important concept behind this book, the concept of the covenant compassion of God.

The Covenant Compassion of God

The theme of the book of Jonah is found in two verses (however the prophecy is saturated with the concept).

Jonah 4:2, "And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.'"

Jonah 4:10-11, "Then the Lord said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?'"

These verses evoke some of the richest and most treasured elements of the covenant that God has established in Christ with us. Consider these:

Lovingkindness: **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*); the word is variously translated as mercy, tenderheartedness, kindness, or lovingkindness. Though we use these terms, we must see that the word in the original cannot be understood outside of a covenant relationship. In the Bible a covenant ideally has two parts: (1) a prior relational commitment and (2) a contract (which normally results from the prior love-relationship). And so on account of love, two people enter into a commitment/covenant (think of marriage). Now the term used to speak of the "loyalty" that ought to characterize this commitment is lovingkindness, **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*)! Accordingly, we understand lovingkindness as covenant loyalty as a result of love.

We see the concept of lovingkindness in the story of Ruth. God's care for Naomi and Ruth is grounded in His deep and abiding love for these two women (Ruth 1:8-9). As such, though Ruth was a Moabitess and Naomi had fled from Israel seeking better pastures [two reasons for why God should have rejected them], nevertheless the Lord cared and provided for them on account of His **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*)! Do you see it? **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*) speaks of an undying, unquenchable loyalty on account of love!

We see it in Ruth where once again the word **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*) is involved (Ruth 2:11-12; 3:10). What impressed Boaz concerning Ruth was her lovingkindness toward Naomi and God by which this

young woman sought a Redeemer from Israel. She could have had almost any man in that day (Ruth 3:10), but her love impelled her to seek out a man from Naomi's family! This is the nuance of "lovingkindness."⁵

Another prominent word in Jonah which is packed with meaning is the word compassion.

Compassion: רַחֲמִים (*rahămîm*); variously translated as, "tender mercy," "tender love," or "compassion"- it is related to the Hebrew word for "womb" (רֶחֶם [*rehem*]). The word for "compassion" refers to deep or superior love which once again is rooted in a "natural" bond. It therefore is a covenant word. When used of God it speaks of an inseparable bond created on account of the kind intention of His will. As a result, God forgives the sins of His people again and again and again. Such is God's disposition toward His children (cf. Psalm 103:14).

It is important to note in light of these two important elements which adhere to the covenant and so our relationship with Christ that we are charged with nothing less than these graces when it comes to the people of God, the covenant community! Speaking of God Jeremiah writes:

Jeremiah 22:16, "He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" declares the Lord."

Because of our relationship with a Being who has loved us unconditionally and so has acted with grace and compassion toward us when we were strangers and aliens, it is expected that we have the same lovingkindness and compassion toward one another.

This is what it means to know God!

Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

When we consider this passage we understand that justice, covenant-mercy, and humility are not merely concepts, but the basis for our ethical conduct as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Truly these graces ought to characterize this body because, "...He first loved us" (1 John 4:19)!

In fact on account of our relationship with God, we are called to nothing less in our relationship with one another.⁶ To lack these characteristics is to incur the disciplining hand of God! Listen to the indictment God gave His people who at the time were using the ceremonies of Baal to worship God- you'd think this would be the chief focus of Amos, but it is not.

Amos 8:4-7, "Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat *market*, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and *that* we may sell the refuse of the wheat?' The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, 'Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.'"

I hope you see it! When a covenant people neglect one another, they have abandoned the faith no matter how much they may profess it or defend it.

You say: I got it! Because we were at one time weak, helpless, and defenseless yet Christ came and pled our cause and so delivered us, this now has become our lasting obligation: love, compassion, mercy!

That's great! Yet that leads us to THE questions of the hour in light of Jonah. First, how can such an ethic be imposed upon pagan, gentile peoples and nations who are not in-covenant with God?

Again, that which evoked the ministry of Jonah was the lack of kindness and care that existed in the pagan and gentile city of Nineveh! This angered God and so He sent Jonah! Second and more importantly, how is it that God in Jonah can be said to express toward the non-Christian two of the most fundamental elements of the Covenant of Grace: compassion and lovingkindness? Consider again Jonah 4:2, 10-11!

These are important questions whose answers are one and the same. Family of God, don't miss it, for this is important! God is in covenant with every man, woman, child, and nation!

Now I know I've spent the last nine years teaching you that the only Christian nation that has ever existed was Israel in the days prior to the exile AND that all other nations that have ever existed or still exist, including the USA and modern day Israel, is a vassal state of Satan (cf. Luke 4:5-7; Revelation 11:15). There are no longer any nations in-covenant with God!

Am I now changing what I've taught in the past? Absolutely not! Indeed, there has only been one Christian nation, one nation in covenant with God. Yet don't miss it! All of mankind to this day still is bound by the covenant of works which was established at Creation! After God created the world, He entered into a relationship with mankind predicated upon the conduct of Adam. If he obeyed God perfectly, all would be saved. If he disobeyed, he and his posterity would die. And so we read this:

Romans 5:18, "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men [speaking of Adam's sin], even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."

1 Corinthians 15:22, 45, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive... So also it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul.' The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit."

Though Adam sinned and so violated the original terms of the covenant of works, that doesn't mean that mankind therefore is freed from their original obligation and so their relationship with God. If a person doesn't pay their rent for a couple of months that doesn't mean that they are now free not to pay; lack of payment doesn't cancel out the obligation or the relationship. So man continues to be in covenant with God, a God of compassion and tender-kindness, a God who holds

all of mankind to the same standard of “compassion and tender-kindness”!

And that is why on the Last Day, every man, woman, and child will be held accountable to the ethical standards which a relationship with God requires! As God is compassionate and gracious to all, so is the standard for ALL peoples, nations, tribes, and tongues. You say, “God is kind and gracious to all? God has ‘lovingkindness’ and ‘compassion’ to all?” Most certainly! While God doesn’t have a salvific kindness to all, nevertheless on account of the Covenant of Works, God does have a general kindness and care when it comes to mankind- we call this common grace!

Psalm 145:9, “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.”

In a Psalm directed toward all men.

Psalm 100:5, “For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations.”

Paul spoke these words to the pagan men and women of Lystra:

Acts 14:15, “[God] did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

In light of this, God has placed this ethical calling upon all men in every place. Listen to the basis of God’s judgment on the Last Day!

Matthew 25:41-46, “Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me *nothing* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ Then they themselves also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

On the Last Day, why will men be cast into the Lake of Fire? Because they haven’t cared for the weak and vulnerable among them! In fact if there should be any question, listen to what constitutes “pure religion” to God.

James 1:27a, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress...”

This passage is a blanket statement. James here is not just talking about Christianity, but ALL religion! What is the essence of pure religion? When is religion at its best? When ones religious affections result in a caring for the weak and helpless among us! That is the theme and focus of Jonah! The Covenant Compassion of God which ought to evoke in us a care and compassion

toward ALL. Again speaking of the Lord:

Jeremiah 22:16, ““He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord.”

From this prophecy we must see that it is not enough to have compassion and loving-kindness for the body of Christ. On account of the fact that mankind bears the image of God and is in covenant with Him, all of mankind is obligated to extend these gracious qualities to one and all: compassion, loving-kindness, mercy, grace, and forgiveness!

Now many so called Christian groups have existed to care for the indolent and needy in many societies. Yet sadly most of these groups have been liberal such that they denied the gospel in favor of social causes. As a result, to discuss the calling for love and compassion toward all people as a ministry of God’s people smacks of a “liberal agenda” and so is quickly dismissed by many a conservative church.

Now while I don’t think the message of Jonah requires formal ministries on the part of the church toward those outside the body of Christ,⁷ nevertheless it does require each and everyone of us to have a love for mankind such that we have a genuine interest in them, their soul, and their welfare. Leslie Allen closed his commentary on the book of Jonah with these words:

A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity. He that has ears to hear, let him hear and allow the saving love of God which has been outpoured in his own heart to remold his thinking and social orientation. (Allen, 1976, p. 235)

Note(s)

¹ Effective Assyrian intervention in Palestine ended with the campaigns of Adad-nirari III (809-782 BC), who at the end of the ninth century moved west and defeated the Aramaeans of Damascus, who had been harassing Israel since the end of Jehu’s reign (ca. 816 BC; cf. 2 Kings 13:5).

² During the first half of the 8th century, the Assyrian nation was preoccupied both with Armenia and with internal strife.

³ If you like, you can look all this up in a good Bible dictionary or commentary.

⁴ Sāamsûi-Adad V (823-811 BC), Adad-nirari III (811-783 BC), Shalmaneser IV (782-773 BC)

⁵ When used of God it always implies a prior commitment of love which results in an unconditional loyalty. In the context of a covenant relationship between men, the concept is powerful. That is why often in the ancient world when secular kings and nations entered into a covenant, they invoked the language of חֶסֶד (*hesed*) to “...make the vassal promise to act like a brother, friend, or husband in the relationship!” (Harris, R. Laird ; Harris, Robert Laird ; Archer, Gleason Leonard ; Waltke, Bruce K.: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago : Moody Press, 1999, c1980, p. 306.)

⁶ cf. Isaiah 25:1, 4, 5; Jeremiah. 22:17-19.

⁷ ...anymore than it is the church’s job to form PACs or Christians Schools.

Allen, L. C. (1976). *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Merril, E. H. (1997). *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

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About the Preacher

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