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The Sign of Jonah

When most people recall the book of Jonah, they immediately think about a whale swallowing a disobedient prophet. But that misses the complete point of the story. Jonah is a sign for Israel, the people during Jesus' earthly ministry and those walking the planet today. Consider these questions as we go through this prophetic story.

- What is revealed about the nature of God in this book?
- How does this book point to and foreshadow the life and work of the Messiah?
- Where are you in the story? How have you been like any of the key figures – Jonah, the sailors, the citizens of Nineveh, the big fish or the worm?

Jonah came a few decades after Elisha, the great prophet. The book is a story, not a typical prophecy per se. It is a story of God's love for all people, including the most evil, vile people on the planet. Nineveh became the capital of the Assyrian Empire. During Jonah's day, it was a major city for the Assyrians though not yet its capital city.

The Assyrians were known as a bloodthirsty people without mercy for their foes. They vanquished many other peoples. They even slaughtered children by dashing their heads against stones. It is no wonder that Jonah despised them and wanted to have nothing to do with them. The Assyrians were the bitter enemies of Israel. Some might even consider Jonah's mission to help the Assyrians to be an act of treason.

In an ultimate twist of irony, God sent Jonah to speak to the Assyrians. Jonah became the first prophet sent outside of Israel. God dispatched Jonah to a pagan culture that he found evil and deplorable.

In a sense, Jonah was the first missionary to a pagan culture. But be careful before you try to make this a handbook for global missions. This book contradicts many modern ideas about missions work and evangelism strategies. Jonah did not have a heart for the people that God sent him to reach. He did not pray or intercede for the Assyrians. He appeared to do the least amount that he had to do to keep God happy.

Some of the other ancient prophets wept, lamented and interceded for those they were called to reach. Yet many of them did not see the results that Jonah witnessed. The religious leaders of the day killed many of those prophets or threw them in dungeons.

Jonah traveled to a heathen nation and preached a basic sermon. He did not preach "turn or burn." No, he just preached "burn." There was no real sense of compassion. But it

didn't seem to matter. The fear of the Lord fell on the people. As a result, thousands upon thousands responded in true repentance.

Jonah's commission shows how God works through people as human messengers. God's message tends to be restricted by the willingness of His servants to do what He calls them to do. This is the case in the life of Jonah. Through this epic adventure we see both man's free will and God's sovereign power at work in the life of both one man and an entire city. God used wind, a big fish, a plant and a worm to test Jonah and accomplish His purposes.

To fully understand the book of Jonah, we must read it in the light of what Jesus said in the New Testament. Jesus said that Jonah was a sign. If the essence of Jonah's story were boiled down to a neon sign, what would it say?

Read Matthew 12: 38-42 and Luke 11:29-32 to see what Jesus had to say. Remember we must first become a sign before we can be a sign to others.

Chapter 1 – Exit Stage Left

The story starts with a call. And Jonah does not like what God wants him to do. This is the first great lesson for anyone who wants to follow God. He will stretch you. He will use you as He sees fit, not as you necessarily want to be used. God cares about what you think, yet He is much more concerned with His glory and the redemption of mankind. Your pet agenda may not make the list. So sorry!

Nineveh must have been a very wicked place. For the world at that time as today was not known for its love and goodwill. Wickedness and injustice could be found everywhere. Yet Nineveh stood out to God. Like Jonah, God may send you to a place that at first seems too wicked to care. God's plan may not make any sense, and it might even make you unpopular with others around you. That's the price of following God. That's the burden of carrying His Word.

Jonah did what any sensible person would do. He runs for it. While we may think this sound like an odd move, we might think, "Did Jonah really think he could run from God?" We aren't being honest. How many of us do the same thing today? God may be calling us to endure a hardship, take a leap of faith or stay on a difficult mission. But we want to bolt at the first sign that we might be able to get away. I see this reaction a lot with family problems, marriages, membership in churches, difficult work situations, ministry commitments, etc.

Why stay and get hammered? It's much easier to run. But we may be running away from a cross that God wants us to bear. We may be running from what we need to grow as individuals and become more like Jesus.

In the long run is life really easier for those who always flee at the first sign of hardship? We think we can run away from sin and problems. But they have a way of following us

even to the ends of the earth. I have seen people run to the mission field in an attempt to hide from God or avoid a problem back at home. I have seen families split up instead of work through the problems because both sides found it nearly impossible to forgive and reconcile. Some of these same people years later will tell of their regret. They wish they had stayed and worked through the situation. Sometimes it is OK to run. You need to just make sure that you are heading toward where God wants to take you.

Jonah had to come to grips with his own prejudice. This story identifies that prejudice can be a strong force. It can even lead us to defy God. But when we confront prejudice, our actions may free others to see God and His truth in a new light. These lessons did not come easy to Jonah. Instead, he jumped on board a boat and headed in the exact opposite direction from where God had instructed him to go.

Jonah went West to Tarshish, which is believed to have been somewhere near modern Spain. According to one scholar, it was the farthest reaches of the known world at that time. In essence, Jonah went as far away from where God wanted him to go as was humanly possible. And God still found him.

Because Jonah had the money to buy a ticket, he went the wrong way and initially missed out on God's will. This shows us that having the resources to go is not necessarily the same as being sent.

Jonah knew God's will. His instructions were clear. Jonah's crisis was not one of hearing the voice of God. His problem was one of obedience. When you see the reaction of the men on the boat to the storm, it seems that they had more fear of God than the great prophet did.

They eventually threw him overboard after doing everything else to save the ship. It always seemed kind of odd to me that Jonah didn't seem to care about much of anything. He rested while others fought for the boat against the great storm. He shied away from praying or doing anything "religious" to deal with the life-threatening situation. The sailors and other passengers were praying to their gods. The Scriptural account gives the impression that Jonah didn't care if he lived anymore. He simply told the others to throw him overboard. I get the sense that Jonah had reached the end of his rope. He knew that he could not run from God anymore. But he wasn't ready to do what God wanted him to do quite yet.

The sailors appeared to be good men. They prayed for forgiveness for casting Jonah overboard. It is obvious they did not want to do what they felt that they had to do. The storm stopped after they got rid of Jonah. This confirmation caused them to fear the Lord. They offered sacrifices and made vows. Even when Jonah disobeyed, God turned everything around to His glory. God can take even our mistakes and outright sins and make something glorious out of it.

Through the storm and the big fish, we see God working to accomplish His plans. He protects his servant and chases after Him. Does Jonah show us a clear picture of what it

means that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance? God prepared the great fish. Jonah's story shows God moving to get his people where we need to be even if we head the wrong direction. God knows our true hearts and His desires for us. I don't understand why God would seem to intervene in some situations and not others. All I know is that God will get what He wants in the end. And His ways are truly better than our ways. His thoughts are much higher and wiser than our thoughts.

Chapter 2 – A prayer from the gut

According to Scripture, Jonah was in the belly of the big fish for three days and three nights. Some scholars debate the likelihood of the story. They present the account as a metaphor or literary device used to convey a message. But this doesn't seem any more preposterous than any other miracle recorded in the Bible. If God can create everything from nothing and make the sun stand still for a day, how hard would it be to instruct a fish to swallow Jonah and protect him in its belly?

Jesus referred to the story of Jonah. He used it in making a point about his sacrifice on the cross and resurrection, which were events that really took place. Why would he use a made-up story as a comparison for His greatest act of ministry? It seems that Jesus believed in the veracity of the story. And if it is good enough for him, then it must be good enough for me.

What do you think Jonah was doing and thinking while in the belly of the fish for three days and nights? Was he slowly digesting or was he reaching the point of complete surrender?

It wasn't until after the three days and nights that he finally prayed a great prayer of faith and surrender. Sin and disobedience can cause us to avoid God. Prayer requires us to run to God. Except for the occasional ranting prayer, it puts us in a place of humility where we must acknowledge God. In prayer, we admit that God is more powerful than we are. The famous preacher and author, John Bunyan once said, "Prayer will make a man cease from sin; or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer."

Sometimes we have to come to the end of ourselves in order for us to turn to God. We have to run out of options.

Jonah's prayer combines a mixture of faith, statements of deliverance and promises to God. One thing the prophet doesn't seem to do is complain about his situation. He does not argue with God about the call to speak to a wicked people. Jonah describes his torments and current condition. While He does identify God's hand in those circumstances, he also declares God's mercy in saving him.

In verse 2:2, Jonah affirms his belief that God has heard his cries. Even before he is fully delivered, he declares by faith that salvation comes from the Lord. Jonah ascribes to God the storm and being swallowed by a fish. Even though Jonah appears to be going down to the depths, he looked again unto God's temple where there is mercy and atonement.

The darkness surrounded Jonah. It penetrated even to the depths of his soul. Sea weed wrapped around his head as a crown of despair. You can see the apparent futility of his predicament. Jonah reached the lowest, worst point of his life. Jonah had not lost hope even in a place where God seemed to be distant and hidden from view.

In those moments, He declared God's ability and desire to save. Jonah talked about his soul fainting within him. Yet, he believed. Jonah's prayer may be one of the greatest prayers of faith ever.

You have to remember where he was. He was in the belly of a fish. It was dark, smelly and cramped. He was covered in seaweed. He was far from home. He had made God angry. Jonah was running from the most powerful force in the universe. And he had no reason to believe that he would live another day or get another chance. The only thing that allowed him to press beyond despair is what he knew about God. When life seems the worst, it is your faith in God that will see you through.

In verse 2:8, Jonah said that those who are prideful and believe lies look away from the hand that would deliver them. He did not appear to want to make this mistake again. He sought God's mercy and was prepared to take it.

In the middle of the fish's belly, Jonah began to worship God with thanksgiving. What had been a place of despair and death became a good place to repent and rejoice. Jonah declared that he will pay his vows to God. He said, "Salvation is of the Lord."

Upon Jonah's change in heart and declaration to follow God's call, the Lord completed his deliverance. You see, the big fish was actually part of God's plan to deliver Jonah and cause transformation to take place within him. Sometimes things in our lives seem like big fishes that we view as bad places. But God wants to use these to change us and bring us deeper levels of His life.

God spoke to the fish and told him to vomit the prophet onto dry land. I can imagine how the people would react to a man who gets barfed out of a giant fish. He probably was covered in seaweed. His clothes had to be ragged. He probably smelled and may have looked flush white. You know it's not everyday that you meet a guy who gets vomited from a giant fish. This dramatic entrance had to make an impression. Maybe that is why so many people listened to what Jonah had to say. But I believe it is more than that. Let's look and see what led up to one of the greatest revivals in recorded history.

Chapter 3 – A Revival of Biblical Proportions

If you stroll through any religious bookstore section, you can find a number of books that cover "revival" and profound moves of God through the ages. Some people even try to teach various approaches to sparking revival in the lives of people. It is interesting that one of the greatest revivals recorded in the Bible seems to break all of the unwritten rules. What takes place in Nineveh is truly a revival of Biblical proportions.

During the time of Jonah, Nineveh was a very large town with 120,000 or more inhabitants. It was one of the oldest large cities in the world. The record of its beginnings goes back to Genesis 10:11-12. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, it required three days to walk the entire city.

The city responded to a brief yet urgent message. Jonah walked a third of the way through the city and then began to cry this message: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” We don’t know if Jonah said more than this or kept his sermon very simple. Jonah was not thrilled with his assignment. As a result, I believe he likely did the bare minimum to complete his task. He did not have a heart for the people that God called him to reach. There doesn’t appear to be any sign of hope in Jonah’s message.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, we see a gracious God giving a reluctant prophet a second chance. The Word of the Lord came again to Jonah. God told him to preach what He instructed him to say. We don’t know if Jonah did exactly as God instructed or not. Jonah could have gone and only delivered the parts of the message that he wanted to say. While the prophet was certainly repentant and broken in the fish’s belly, he was now on dry land. He may have only been partially obedient at this point. We certainly see by his later actions that he at that time had not caught God’s heart for those people. We just don’t know all the details. What Jonah said doesn’t seem to matter as much as the fact that the people believed what he had to say.

Actually if you look at the text, more than just believing Jonah, the people believed God. This is important because what you truly believe about God impacts how you live. When I hear people talk about having faith in God and yet their lives do not reflect God’s truth and His light, I doubt the sincerity of their statements. True belief is much more than just mental assent to a few statements or doctrines. It requires action.

The people of Nineveh responded in true repentance. They proclaimed a fast throughout the land. From the greatest to the least, the entire nation turned to God. They put on sackcloth, which is a ceremonial garment that people wear when they are sorrowful and in deep regret for something. It was a coarse, dark fabric. People made bags and sacks out of it. Sackcloth symbolizes the raw feelings that people wearing it must have had. It certainly was neither fashionable nor comfortable.

Even the king of the land heard the message and repented. He removed his royal robe, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. This is not a surface level repentance. The people even covered animals with sackcloth to represent how their sin impacted even the beasts of the land.

Nineveh’s leaders instructed the people to turn from their wicked ways, especially the violence they had practiced. They did this without any guarantee of how God would respond. The people said, “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”

God did decide not to destroy the city. The thing that did the trick was not that they felt sorry for the bad things they had done nor what they said. God diverted from his original plan when the people stopped doing the bad things they did. It was their actions that moved God to mercy. The story of Nineveh shows two very different yet equally important aspects to God's character. God is both merciful and vengeful. He will pour out wrath and dispense mercy.

One of the major deciding factors in how God responds is what we do first. God will do whatever is necessary to ensure that His will is done. He will uphold His glory and plans.

Chapter 4 – Jonah's Inner Struggle

Jonah's preaching caused a widespread revival. You would think that he would be happy. But no. Nineveh's reaction angered the prophet. Knowing God's character, especially his mercy, Jonah feared that his enemies would be spared. Jonah wanted the Assyrians to suffer just like his people had. He wanted them to experience the same anguish that Israel did.

Despite everything that Jonah had been through, he was still full of hate, anger, prejudice and unforgiveness. Overcome by despair and disillusionment, Jonah asked for God to kill him. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." I don't believe that the prophet was just being melodramatic. Jonah had seen their great sin, and his sense of justice required that Nineveh be punished.

Somehow, he had failed to see his sin. The story of Jonah is as much about what God wanted to do in the heart of the prophet as the repentance of a pagan city. God was not finished working with Jonah yet. He would rather just give up than learn the lesson that God desired to teach him.

I get this picture of Jonah going outside of the city and sitting down with a bag of popcorn. He wanted to watch the show and see what God would do. I wonder if he expected God to send an earthquake or ball of fire from the sky at any moment. He was prepared to wait because he made a booth to sit under for protection.

Jonah wanted fireworks, but God had a different storyline to write. The Lord sent a vine to provide shade as the sun beat down on the angry prophet. Jonah appreciated the shade. Then God sent a worm that caused the vine to wither. The winds blew and the heat beat down on Jonah's head. The prophet was so overcome that he almost fainted. Even more than before, he wished that he would die.

Although Jonah did nothing to produce the vine, he was angry when God removed it. He was angry that God relented from destroying Nineveh. While steam may have been rising from Jonah's head, he was more than likely boiling on the inside.

God cut right to the point. He asked Jonah if he had any right to be angry about the loss of his shade vine. Was Jonah's anger beneficial to him? Jonah proclaimed that he did have a right to be angry. Indeed, he was angry enough to die.

God wanted to use the vine to help Jonah see why He did not destroy Nineveh. God pointed out that Jonah was mad about the vine being destroyed, but he did not have any compassion for the Assyrians. If the vine is worth saving how much more important are the souls of men and the lives of beasts?

Jonah was upset about the vine because its destruction negatively affected him. The prophet's mistake is that he was not looking at the world from God's point of view. His limited human understanding failed to grasp the big picture. God saw the people of Nineveh as morally inept. They could not distinguish their right from their left hand. They sinned out of their ignorance. Why should God not spare them if they repent?

The last line of the book shows God's concern for animals. He mentioned the large amount of cattle that would needlessly suffer by destroying the city. God cares about his creation. Cows matter to God. That reality should impact how Christians act toward all living things. God intends us to be stewards and exercise dominion over all creation. We can kill animals when we have good reason. Sure, we can use animals for food, clothing, works, etc. God is not against the proper use of creation. The key is to act in a way that honors God and respects His will for His stuff. Everything belongs to God. That is why everything matters to Him.

Lessons for Today

Although Jonah is a little book in the Bible, it hits on many big themes. From free will to missions to justice, the story still resonates with people today. We have all seen somebody "get away with murder." And many of us have responded just as Jonah did. It can be real easy to desire mercy for us and yet hard to give forgiveness to others.

Hesed is the Hebrew word roughly translated loving-kindness, mercy, compassion. One translation renders the word fourteen different ways. It defies translation. Yet it is a major defining characteristic of God.

When God shows Hesed to our enemies, it can be hard to understand. It can even make us very angry. But if we remember the lessons of Jonah, we may start to see that God has a good reason for what He does. Sometimes God wants to use apparent injustice to change those who see clearly the sin of others. God may want to work in us just as much as in the "bad" people.

While Scripture does not give a complete picture of what happened to Jonah, I believe that he came around and eventually adopted God's heart toward compassion and mercy. He may have still struggled with prejudice. But I think he became a sign because he changed. More than what we say, our lives become a message when we transform to look more like God.

If Jonah had never learned the lesson that God was showing him, I think that the account of his story would have been told with more bias. The author does not hide any of the details that make Jonah look bad. He comes across as a prejudiced, disobedient, ungrateful, angry man. Nobody could have known the details in the story except God and Jonah. Thus, even if Jonah did not write the book, he almost had to be its source.

Jesus called Jonah a sign. This occurred on many levels. His ordeal in the belly of the fish resembles Christ's experience on the cross. It also shows us the process that we must go through to become more like God. If we want to become like Jesus, we must deny our own desires and thoughts, take up our cross and follow God wherever He leads us. Jonah's life shows us how God may have a plan for us that will challenge the very core of everything we believe. And in the process, God will change us to become more like Him.

Jesus compared the people of Nineveh to the Jews of His day. He used their repentance as a sign to show how misguided the Jews had become. They would not listen when He spoke as one greater than Jonah or even King Solomon. Sometimes the religious people are the hardest people to change because we have our concept of God, and we don't want it to change.

Jonah's story shows the destructive power of hatred, prejudice and unforgiveness. These attitudes tend to lead to pride and hypocrisy. We become blind to our own faults. We fail to see God's heart in a matter.

The greatest tragedy of this story takes place in another book of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Nahum, Jonah finally gets his original wish. God called Nahum to prophecy against Nineveh because the city fell back into sin. It became exceedingly wicked even after experiencing a great revival. When one generation died off, the next did not remember God's wrath. The people lost the fear of the Lord. Then the society became so depraved that God allowed the consequences of sin to bear down upon the city.

Nahum prophesied probably 150 years after Jonah. It did not take long for the Assyrians to fall away from God. Nahum foretold the destruction of the city. This time there would be no relenting. Nahum served not as a call to repentance but a declaration of judgment.

The city eventually fell 100 years later in 606 B.C. The city was destroyed. Its treasures were plundered and people were taken into captivity. One of the greatest cities of the world was completely destroyed and never rebuilt.

Nineveh's story stands as a warning today. Even though a nation experiences revival in one generation, it can be easy for future generations to walk away from God. And while God may appear longsuffering, He will surely repay man for his sin. Whatever we sow, we shall also reap.

Even in a land where there is a lot of knowledge and many books, people can fall deep into sin and depravity. Nineveh became known as a city with a tremendous royal library

detailing the history of civilization. The library contained over 10,000 tablets. Some even covered things like creation or the great flood. Nineveh did not perish for a lack of knowledge. Its people lost faith and relationship with God. They failed to live by the sign of Jonah just as the people did during Jesus' earthly ministry.

What about you? Are you following the signs that God is revealing through history, society and everyday life? Is your life a sign to others? Before your life can be a sign, you must first become a sign. We become people who have something to say by allowing God to transform us.

May you wrestle with these thoughts and not run from them. You can run to the ends of the earth, and your past will catch up with you. Jonah's story illustrates the futility of running. You can either trust God and follow His plans or take your chances with the storms of life and the big fish in the sea.