

The Prophet on the Run

Jonah 1:1-6

Pastor Richard Yu

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The education I had in Taiwan stressed hatred towards Japan from the history of the Sino-Japanese war during the years of the Second World War, so much so that I grew up being racist towards Japanese people until after college. In this way I can sympathize with Jonah and his attitude towards the Ninevites, who lived in the capital of Assyria, Israel's major enemy. Jonah was a prophet in Israel at the time of Jeroboam II, during whose reign God showed grace and prospered Israel despite the king's disobedience (2 Kings 14:23-25). Yet Jonah could not accept that God would show such grace to Nineveh.

There are four common ways of interpreting the book of Jonah. The first focuses on the typological similarity between Jonah and Jesus. In Matthew 12:39 Jesus compares Himself to Jonah because just as Jonah spent 3 days in the belly of the fish and was vomited out, Jesus spend 3 days in the grave before the resurrection. Second, Jonah can be seen as a negative stereotype of the Jews, who hated Gentiles and had no compassion for them. Third, according to John Calvin, the book of Jonah serves as a warning to Christians against resisting God's purpose and devaluating the people whom God desires to reach. Finally, some see this book as a parable against spiritual prejudice across all generations. All of these ideas surface in some shape or form throughout the book. However, I would treat this book as historical narrative rather than a mere parable, since that is how Jesus used it in His teaching.

The first major theme in the book of Jonah is God's disturbing and even seemingly unreasonable compassion, which is so unlike our own conditional and limited compassion. God had compassion towards the depraved Ninevites, enemies of His people Israel, who completely lacked moral direction and ruthlessly pursued their cruel ambition for conquest. Sin is deeply offensive to God and enrages Him. Yet His response to sinners is compassion. He was ready to punish them, yet His intent was not to destroy, but to save them from their sin. He wanted to give them a chance to repent, and when they did, God relented. We all have experienced God's unreasonable compassion in our lives as well, since His response to our sin was to send Jesus to save us, just as Jonah was sent to the Ninevites.

The second theme is God's persistent grace. Jonah son of Amittai literally means "dove," "son of truth." The dove was a symbol of peace and of the end of God's judgment (Genesis 8).

Jonah was sent to deliver truth to Nineveh, that they might be spared God's judgment. God intended for Jonah to participate in His act of grace. But Jonah sailed in the opposite direction to Tarshish, in Spain, the end of the known world. Such a journey takes 3 years to and from and finding a ship that would make the journey was not readily available. Perhaps Jonah thought that God allowed him to run away since he was able to board such a ship, but God wouldn't give up so easily. He could have just chosen another prophet, but He persistently pursued Jonah so that he could take part in His work of grace. He took the trouble to send the storm to wake Jonah up, to provide the fish to swallow him, and to send him out once again. He does not give up so easily as we do.

The third theme is that Jonah points to Jesus—the true prophet. The infinite mercy and grace that God showed towards Nineveh and Jonah is manifest in Jesus Christ, who like Jonah was sent to save us from sin, spent 3 days in the belly of the grave, and then was resurrected. The story of Jonah is the gospel story. It is about God's passion to reach us and save us. He is committed to save the world through His people. Do you take seriously your mission to reach the unsaved, or are you reluctant as Jonah was? Perhaps is there a Nineveh for us, those to whom we have difficulty showing compassion, like the homeless, Muslims, illegal aliens, or atheists. Can you let God's grace transcend these prejudices? We may not be held back by prejudice like Jonah was, but perhaps the pursuit of comfort and affluence has led us to run away from God's calling. There is a cost to following Jesus, are you willing to accept it? The life we are called to is not easy. Let us listen to what God tells us through Jonah's story, let us live our lives in a way that expresses God's compassion and grace for others.