

God's Sovereign Grace and the Story of Jonah

Introduction

The book of Jonah is a bit different from the other prophetic books in the Old Testament. It is a story about Jonah's life rather than a collection of prophetic judgments. But its place in the Old Testament is important largely because it teaches about God's sovereign love and grace, and his willingness to forgive all peoples when they turn from their sin and worship him alone.

The book begins with God commissioning Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to tell them that judgment for their wickedness is coming. But Jonah disobeys God and boards a ship heading for Tarshish; and that is where things get very interesting. The author of Jonah makes it clear that God's sovereign will is influencing the flow of the story. When Jonah runs from the Lord, God *appoints* a storm to stall the ship. After the crew of the ship throws Jonah overboard, God *appoints* a great fish to swallow him. Then, after Jonah prays in the belly of the whale, God makes the fish vomit him unto dry land. Following all that, God *commissions* Jonah a second time. This time Jonah goes, but when he speaks to the people of Nineveh, they repent! Oddly enough, Jonah is mad that God had compassion for them, and he even tells God that he did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew God was gracious and compassionate. Jonah certainly has a lot to learn, so God teaches him a lesson about his grace.

Background

Shortly before God appointed Hosea and Amos to warn the northern kingdom of Israel of the coming judgment, God commissions Jonah to go to Nineveh. By God's sovereign choice, the coming judgment was an invasion by the Assyrians, and Nineveh was an Assyrian city. Then, about fifty years after God relented his anger against Nineveh, Assyria invaded Israel and took them into captivity.

2 Kings 14:23-25 says, "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. 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. He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, what was of Gath-hepher." The book of Jonah is only a small part of Jonah's life and ministry. God also called and used him to help and speak to his own people.

Themes

Jonah is more about the character and love of God than it is about the prophet the book was named after. There are several themes in Jonah, and most of them are God-centered. First, God is sovereign over all things. Several times throughout the book, God sovereignly *appoints* things or people to do his will so that he can accomplish his good purposes. Second, God has a right to forgive and be gracious to whoever he chooses. Third, God is patient with Jonah and with Nineveh; he often offers second chances. Fourth, Jonah needed God's grace just as much as Nineveh did, and Jonah was just as sinful as the people of Nineveh. Although Jonah understands that God is gracious and compassionate and that he saves people in desperate need, he still had much to learn.

**“Trouble in Nineveh, Or Jonah Disobeys God’s Word”
(Jonah 1)**

MIT: Jonah’s disobedience to God’s commission does not keep God from accomplishing things for his glory through Jonah.

1. The Lord commissions Jonah to go to Nineveh, but he disobeys (1:1-3).
 - a. God commissions one of his prophets to confront Nineveh about their sin (1).
 - b. God confronts the sins of all people—not just the sins of Israel (2).
 - c. God knows about the sin and wickedness of all people (2b).
 - d. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, so he tries to flee from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish (3).

2. The Lord sovereignly pursues Jonah (1:4-16).
 - a. The Lord *hurls* a great wind and storm on the sea (4).
 - b. The pagan sailors become afraid and begin to cry out to their gods (5a).
 - c. Somehow, Jonah is sleeping during the storm (5b-6).
 - d. God sovereignly confronts Jonah; he is even the ruler over lots (7).
 - e. Jonah tells the crew that he is a prophet of the Lord and that he was trying to flee from Him (9-10).
 - f. Jonah tells the crew to throw him overboard, but they refuse (11-13).
 - g. The storm gets worse, so the crew calls on the Lord, and then they throw Jonah in the sea (14-15a).
 - h. The sea stops raging, immediately (15b).
 - i. The men worship the Lord (16).

3. The Lord sovereignly preserves Jonah (1:17).
 - a. The Lord *appointed* a great fish to swallow Jonah (17a).
 - b. Jonah is preserved in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights (17b).

Practical Application:

1. God may want you to go and do things that you do not want to do in places you do not want to go.
2. The Lord sovereignly pursues his children when they are disobedient.
3. The Lord sovereignly preserves his children—sometimes extraordinarily.

**“Jonah in the Belly of a Great Fish, Or God’s Loving Discipline”
(Jonah 2)**

MIT: In the belly of a great fish, Jonah prays a psalm of thanksgiving and celebration for the Lord’s deliverance and mercy.

1. Jonah turns to the Lord in the belly of the great fish (2:1-3).
 - a. Jonah prays (1).
 - b. The cry of Jonah focuses on his desperate situation (2-3).
 - b. Jonah knows that he is only being preserved from death by God’s hand (3).
2. Jonah thanks God for his saving presence (2:4-6).
 - a. Although Jonah fled from the Lord, he can still turn and look to God (4).
 - b. Even with water and darkness all around him, and weeds wrapped around him, Jonah remembers God’s loving and saving character (5-6).
3. Salvation *belongs* to the Lord (2:7-9).
 - a. Jonah says that he remembered the Lord in the belly of the fish, and his desperate prayer made it to God in His temple (7).
 - b. Jonah knows that those who worship anything or anyone other than the Lord forsake their hope of God’s steadfast love (8).
 - c. Jonah still has a lot to learn about God’s steadfast love (8; see 4:1-2).
 - c. Jonah vows to sacrifice what he vowed to pay to the Lord (9a).
 - d. Salvation can only be given to people by the Lord’s grace (9b).
4. The Lord *sovereignly* delivers Jonah from the belly of the great fish (10).
 - a. The Lord *spoke* to the fish (10a).
 - b. The fish *obeyed* the voice of the Lord and vomited Jonah upon the dry land (10b).

Practical Application:

1. God gets the attention of his children when they are desperate.
2. Repent and look to God’s saving character when you sin.
3. We all need salvation from God’s wrath to God’s grace, and salvation is God’s gift to give to those he chooses.
4. God sovereignly delivers his children at the right time.

**“Jonah Goes to Nineveh, Or God’s Compassion for Nineveh”
(Jonah 3)**

MIT: God lovingly forgives the Gentile sinners of Nineveh when they repent after hearing Jonah preach.

1. God commissions Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh (3:1-4).
 - a. The Lord wants to accomplish his purpose by using Jonah (1-2).
 - b. This time, Jonah obeys the Lord, and went to Nineveh (3a).
 - c. Nineveh was an important city in the region, and it was important to God (3b).
 - d. Jonah preached that God would destroy the city for their sins in 40 days (4).

2. The people of Nineveh hear Jonah and repent of their sins (3:5-9).
 - a. The people believed God (5a).
 - b. The people repent, fast, and mourn with sackcloth and ashes (5b).
 - c. The king also repents and humbles himself (6).
 - d. The king makes an official proclamation that everyone must repent of their sins, fast, and call out mightily to God (7-8).
 - e. The people hope that God will have mercy (9).

3. When God sees their repentance, he forgives them (3:10).
 - a. God wants to show the nations his mercy (10).
 - b. God will forgive sinners if they repent (10).
 - c. God will judge and destroy unrepentant sinners (10).

Practical Application:

1. Obey God when he asks you to do something for him.
2. Like the people of Nineveh, we are all sinners, and we must repent of our sins.
3. Like the people of Nineveh, God will forgive you too, if you repent of your sins.

**“Jonah’s Anger at the Lord’s Compassion, Or God’s Sovereign Grace”
(Jonah 4)**

MIT: God uses object lessons to teach Jonah about His compassion and love for the people he created.

1. Jonah responds to God’s mercy with anger and displeasure (4:1-3).
 - a. Some people do not want God to be merciful to sinners (1).
 - b. Jonah expresses his complaint and explains that he fled to Tarshish because he knew God is gracious and compassionate (2a).
 - c. God may have mercy on sinners and relent concerning judgment (2b).

2. The Lord uses a plant to teach Jonah about his sovereign grace (4:4-9).
 - a. God questions Jonah’s ‘right’ to be angry with God (4).
 - b. God *appoints* a plant to give Jonah shade in the heat while Jonah watches to see what will happen to Nineveh (5-6a).
 - c. Jonah is happy about the shade the plant gives him (6b).
 - d. God then *appoints* a worm to kill the plant (7).
 - e. Without the plant, God *appoints* the wind and sun to make Jonah uncomfortable (8).
 - f. God asks Jonah if he has reason to be angry, and Jonah says, “Yes” (9).

3. God says that he will have compassion on whom he will have compassion (4:10-11).
 - a. God says that Jonah loved a plant that he did not work to make it grow (10a).
 - b. There are some things more important than plants that provide shade (10b).
 - c. The people of Nineveh are important to God (11a).
 - d. They now know about God’s mercy and commands (11b; also see 3:4-10)

Practical Application:

1. We are all sinners and in desperate need of God’s mercy; love even your enemies.
2. God’s grace is His grace to give, and so is His judgment because the entire world is His.
3. You are important to God just like Jonah and just like the people of Nineveh.