



Jonah

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-02:15

The book of Jonah, a subversive story about a rebellious prophet who hates God for loving his enemies. Jonah's unique among the prophets of the Old Testament because they're typically collections of God's words spoken through the prophet, but this book doesn't actually focus on the words of the prophet. Rather, it's a story about a prophet, a really mean and nasty prophet. Jonah appears only one other time in the Old Testament—it's during the reign of Jeroboam II, one of Israel's worst kings. And Jonah prophesied in his favor, promising that he would win a battle and regain all this territory on Israel's northern border.

Now, it's important to know that the prophet Amos also confronted Jeroboam, and through him, God specifically reversed Jonah's prophesy, promising that Jeroboam would lose all those same territories because he was so horrible. So before the story of Jonah even begins, we are suspicious of Jonah's character.

The book of Jonah has a beautiful design with all this literary pairing and symmetry. So you have chapters 1 and 3 telling the story of Jonah's encounter with non-Israelites, first with some sailors and then with Jonah's hated enemies the Ninevites. And each part offers a comic contrast between Jonah's selfishness and the pagans' humility and repentance. Chapters 2 and 4 contain prayers of Jonah. One is a prayer of repentance—kind of. And the other is a prayer in which Jonah chews out God for being too nice.

Now, this careful design of the book is matched by a really unique style of narration. The story's full of all of these stereotyped characters who, ironically, do the exact opposite of what you think they would do. So you have the prophet, the man of God, who rebels and hates his own God. You have the sailors who are supposed to be really immoral, but actually they have soft, repentant hearts and

turn to God in humility. You have the king of the most powerful, murderous empire on the planet, and he humbles himself before God because of Jonah's five-word sermon, and even the king's cows repent.

This kind of story fits what today we would call satire. These are stories about well-known figures who are placed in extreme circumstances, and they use humor and irony to critique their stupidity and character flaws. Let's just dive in, and we'll see how all the pieces work together.

Chapter 1

02:15-03:56

The story opens as God addresses Jonah and commissions him to go preach against the evil and injustice in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, Israel's bitter enemy. But instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah goes in the opposite direction, finding a ship going as far west as you can go, to Tarshish. Now the big question here is: Why? Why does Jonah run? Is he afraid? Does he just not like Nineveh? And we're not told yet.

So the man of God tries to run from God, and he boards a ship full of pagan sailors. He goes down into the ship, and then he falls asleep. So God sends a huge storm to wake up his prophet. While ironically, the sailors above board are wide awake to everything that's happening. They can discern that there's a divine power at work here, so they throw the dice and they discover that Jonah, he is the culprit. So they ask Jonah to explain himself, and Jonah spouts off a whole bunch of religious mumbo jumbo. He says, "Yeah, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God who made the sea and the dry land." What a joke, right? God made the sea and the dry land alright, and Jonah's dumb enough to run from this God by getting on a boat?

And when the sailors ask Jonah what they should do, he says, "Kill me by throwing me overboard," which kind of seems noble at first until you realize that this could actually be his most selfish move yet. I mean, what better way to avoid going to Nineveh? So he puts his blood on these innocent sailors' hands by trying to force them to kill him. They're reluctant, of course, and they repent to God even as they toss him over. The storm subsides, and they end up fearing the God of Israel, and unlike Jonah, they actually worship God.

Chapter 2

03:56-04:34

But God foils Jonah's plans to escape Nineveh. As Jonah's sinking, God provides this strange watery tomb for him, the stomach of a large fish. Now of course, under normal circumstances, this would be certain death, but in this story, everything's upside-down. And so Jonah's submarine death becomes his passage back to life.

Cramped in the stomach of this beast, Jonah utters a prayer where he never technically says that he's sorry, but he does thank God for not abandoning him, and he promises that he will obey God from this point on no matter what. And God's response is quite comic. The whale vomits Jonah back onto dry land.

Chapter 3

04:34-06:12

So once again, God commissions Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh, and Jonah complies. We're told that Nineveh was a gigantic city; it would take days to walk through. So Jonah gets one day in, and here is his message: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." It's five words in Hebrew. Now, his sermon is very short, and it's also odd. I mean, look at what's missing. There's no mention of what the Ninevites have done wrong or of what they should do to respond. There's no mention of who might overturn them, and most noticeable, there's no mention of God. What's going on here? Has Jonah intentionally given the bare minimum of information? It's like he's trying to sabotage his own message or ensure the Ninevites' destruction. There's just no effort on Jonah's part here.

Whatever his motives are, the plan doesn't work. Because no sooner does he utter this five-word sermon, that the king of Nineveh, the entire city, including all its cows, repent in sorrow and ashes. So for the second time, the evil pagans show themselves to be more responsive than God's own prophet. So God forgives the Ninevites, and he doesn't bring destruction on the city.

Now, here's the brilliant part of the story. The last word of Jonah's short sermon, "overturned," means just that—"turned over." And it can refer to a city being overthrown or destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah, but it can also be used of something being transformed, like turned over and changed into its opposite. And so, comically, Jonah's words actually came true, but not in the way that he intended. Nineveh does get turned over as Jonah's enemies repent and find God's mercy.

Chapter 4

06:12-08:06

The final chapter brings all the pieces together. Jonah, he's fuming mad, and he utters his second prayer. He first tells God why he ran away back in chapter 1. It was not because he was afraid; rather, it was because he knew that God was so merciful. And this is great. Jonah actually quotes God's own description of himself from the book of Exodus, and he throws it back in God's face as an insult. He says he knew that God is compassionate and that he would find some way to forgive these horrible Ninevites. You can just hear the disgust in Jonah's voice.

Jonah then cuts off the conversation, and he prays that God would kill him on the spot. He'd rather die than live with a God who forgives his enemies. Fortunate for Jonah, God doesn't comply and simply asks if Jonah's anger is even justified. Jonah ignores the question, and he goes outside the city to camp on a nearby hill, waiting to see what might happen. You know, the Ninevites might repent of their repentance and get roasted after all.

What happens next is very odd. God provides this viney plant to shade Jonah from the sun, and that makes him quite happy. But then God sends a tiny worm to eat up the plant, and so Jonah loses his shade. And there, in the heat of the sun, Jonah asks again that God kill him. So God again asks Jonah if his anger is justified, and Jonah barks back, "Absolutely! Just let me die!" And those are Jonah's last words in the story. God's final words are what concludes the book. He says that this whole vine incident was an attempt to get through to Jonah, right? Jonah got all concerned and emotional over this vine, which he only enjoyed for a day. And God asked Jonah, "You know, aren't humans a bit more valuable than vines? I mean, isn't it okay if God might feel the same kind of emotion and concern for the city of Nineveh that's full of thousands of people who have lost their way and also their cows?"

Conclusion

08:07-08:58

And that's how the book ends, with God asking Jonah for permission to show mercy to his enemies. And what is Jonah's answer? The story doesn't say because that's not the point. The point is that the book is trying to mess with you, and God's questions here are actually addressed to you, the reader. Are you okay with the fact that God loves your enemy?

And so this book holds a mirror up to the one who reads it. In Jonah, we see the worst parts of our own character magnified, which should generate humility and gratitude that God would love his enemies and put up with the Jonah in all of us. And so this strange story actually becomes a message of good news about the wideness of God's mercy that ought to challenge us to the core. And that's the book of Jonah.