

Explore the Bible: No Escape

September 26, 2022

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 2 focuses on Jonah 1:15-2:10.*

What makes Jonah unique among the prophets is that the messages of the book are not brought forth by way of prophetic sermons but by the *life* of the prophet. The prophet, his relationship to God and to his enemies, is the sermon.

Beside structure, what also makes this book unique among the prophets is Jonah's stubborn attitude. It is no shock that a prophet would be reluctant to a difficult call from God; most of our prophets were. What makes Jonah so surprising is he *actually* tried to evade God. He made the decision to run rather than fulfill his divine call.

Most of the settings in this book are either on the way to Nineveh, in Nineveh, or directly outside the Assyrian city. We are led to Nineveh with Jonah. The prophet is reluctant to go and bitter when the city repents. The book is almost a question about what we would do were we Jonah.

Multiple motifs

Though we will soon learn the overarching theme of the book is mercy, throughout there are many motifs. One such motif is that God is working through the prophet, even when he is reluctant. Jonah hops on a boat to run away from God. While at sea, a storm rages. The seamen are afraid and cast lots to see who is responsible. Jonah is. The storm does not stop. So, per Jonah's command, the men throw the prophet overboard into the water.

While at first terrified, the seamen eventually come to fear and give sacrifices (1:16). The same will happen with the great city. Because of

Jonah's actions, those Assyrian citizens will come to know the Lord. Jonah does not plan for this to be the outcome of his actions (and is even reluctant to it for Nineveh), but, nonetheless, God is working through the prophet's actions to bring people to himself.

Another major motif, however, is that even though God will work through his most reluctant messengers, the hope is that all will fear and worship God, even messengers. We seem to get a glimpse of genuine worship of Yahweh in his prayer in chapter two, but Jonah's same appreciation for God's mercy is not extended to his enemies, the Ninevites.

A third motif is the consistent activity of God. God calls Jonah (1:1-2). God delivers Jonah from the fish (2:10). God later give Jonah shelter outside the repentant city only to send a wind and a worm to destroy his comforts as he sits outside the city to pout (4:5-8). God has sent the prophet yet is at work all the while, even (maybe especially) when Jonah is bitter about his call.

Though motifs are woven throughout the book, the section of Jonah which seems to stand in awkward, isolated contrast to the rest is Jonah's prayer in chapter two. Some suspect the prayer should be read as irony.

However, it seems more likely that the prayer is sincere. Jonah is aware of God's salvific character. His problem is not with knowing (intimately) the mercy of God. His problem is that God extends mercy to Jonah's enemies. Further, Jonah's prayer is appreciative of God's mercy, but it is not repentant.

The overarching theme: Mercy

The call for Jonah is to tell others about the mercy of God, of which he has benefited. He is resistant to this call. He may worship the Lord for the ways in which he has personally received such divine grace, but to fear the Lord such that he shares grace to his enemies is beyond his comfort. Jonah

wants mercy but does not want his enemies to have it.

As previously stated, the overarching theme of Jonah is mercy. Jonah receives it but does not want to give it. The seamen receive the mercy of God when he finally calms the storm. The Ninevites will receive mercy when Jonah calls them to repentance. Even stubborn, recalcitrant Jonah will receive mercies from God in the depths of the sea in the belly of a fish. God gives mercy but desires repentance.

Reading Jonah's prayer in chapter two we keep waiting for a moment when the prophet will repent but he does not. He acknowledges the mercy and salvation of God but never admits where he has been unfaithful. We keep waiting for prophet to have a humble, repentant posture but he never does.

God's mercy is great. We can worship God for it, yet never turn to God repenting. Throughout the prophets (Jonah included) the call is always that people will turn to the Lord and *turning to* the Lord requires *turning from* what keeps us from God.

Jesus says that, like Jonah, he would be three days in depth and darkness. Yet, we know that Jesus being in darkness is not fleeing from the call of God but walking right into it. Jesus uses Jonah as an analogy but also stands in stark contrast to the prophet. Jesus worships and fears the Father. We followers of the Lord Jesus are recipients of his great mercy. We also have an example of one who, unlike Jonah, carried out his call with worship and humility.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Session Six lesson for Oct. 9 in the Fall 2022 unit appeared out of sequence. It can be found [here](#).