

The book of Jonah tells a story of a prophet who was told by God to go to Nineveh and preach God's words. But we all know Jonah is not going to do it and just ran away in the opposite direction until God then sent a storm to threaten the ship that Jonah was travelling in, and get Jonah thrown into the sea and a big fish to swallow Jonah, and he stayed inside its belly for three days and three nights.

What is the real story about Jonah to us as mature audiences? It critically tells us as the first point in the book of Jonah: Do not be like Jonah. The book of Jonah is a very special book in the bible. It is one of the 12 minor prophets. The majority of books were about prophets' messages, with the exception of two: the book of Hosea which tells us about the life story of Hosea. The second exception other than the book of Hosea is of course the book of Jonah. Hosea was still representing God faithfully through his actions and words. The book of Jonah is not just the life story of a prophet, but it also tells about a life story of a disobedient prophet for doing the exact opposite of what God wants him to do. Unsurprisingly Jonah learned the lesson the hard way. This story was written down for us so we can hopefully learn the easy way. The message was loud and clear: obey God because you cannot outrun or outsmart Him.

The name of Jonah means dove / pigeon in Hebrew language. It was interesting to know that the "fleeing" prophet should be named after a bird that is known to fly very far, and it is also a symbol of a deliverer of hope and peace. Outside the book of Jonah, his name was only mentioned once which is found in 2 Kings 14:23-25. In that chapter, we get more clues about who Jonah is. We can sympathise why Jonah was disobedient and understand why Jonah was angry at God. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and to call out because evil has come to God's attention. When God says something has come to His attention that means God has chosen this time that something needs to be done.

The Hebrew word for "evil" can be translated into two ways, it can mean evil in sins or evil in sufferings. In the first chapter of the book of Jonah, did God send Jonah to Nineveh because their sins have caught God's attention? Or was it because their sufferings have caught God's attention? Because this word "evil" has an ambiguous meaning, it becomes an ironic theme that runs throughout the story of Jonah. The word "evil" was only mentioned in nine verses out of 48 verses in the book of Jonah. Why was the word "evil" an ironic theme? Because it is open for interpretation. Did God send Jonah to Nineveh to preach the message of judgement or the message of mercy? God simply commanded Jonah to call out against the evil of Nineveh. God did not specify the content of His message to the people of Nineveh. It was up to Jonah to interpret God's message according to his best knowledge. Jonah thinks God's message was to judge them but he got it half wrong. It was certainly true to say that God will judge Assyria for its sins, as He made that promise through the book of Hosea chapter 10. It was also certainly true that God has shown His mercy for the people of Nineveh, it was clearly reviewed in the last chapter of the book of Jonah.

The second point in the book of Jonah is a story about God's mercy. We realised the word "evil" should be read in two ways: it should be read as suffering because the Lord is a loving God. He genuinely cares about His creations. At the same time it should also be read as sin because the Lord is a holy God. He genuinely cares about righteousness. The message of mercy and the message of judgement cannot be separated from each other. Mercy is only needed when there is judgement. All these problems come beautifully and meaningfully. This bizarre story involved a disobedient prophet and a repentant gentile city, and by the mercy of God both of them were saved.

The third and last point in the book of Jonah is ultimately about Jesus Christ. The story of Jonah is about the salvation of Nineveh, but in a way it is also about the salvation of the gentiles in which we are among them. In many ways Jonah has failed as a prophet, he failed to obey God, he failed to understand the mercy and justice of God, and he failed to love the sinners like God did. Because of these failures, Jonah falls short of the promised Messiah. Because of these failures, we are directed at the greater and better Jonah who will accomplish what Jonah could not achieve.

Discussion Questions

1. Jonah learned his lesson of obedience the hard way. What about you, have you ever learned a lesson of obedience the hard way? If you are given a second chance, would you rather learn it the easy way, or still the hard way?
2. Even though the people of Nineveh were evil, God still showed them, and likewise us, his abundant mercy. As the recipient of God's mercy, we are called to show others the same kind of mercy and love. Looking in your own life, can you identify a person, or a kind of person, you could never love or forgive? What if God sends you to the person, just like how he sent Jonah to Nineveh?
3. Throughout the Bible, we have seen numerous people being angry at God, and they lashed out their frustration directly at Him. Still, God had been quite patient and gentle with them, as if they weren't too wrong. The question is, do you think they are doing wrong? If they are wrong, why does God not rebuke them?