

God wants you to hear Jonah's story as an earlier chapter in your story. This is a situation that your however many times great grandfather went through, and since it's part of your family history, the lessons learned are part of your family legacy. And the value of this family legacy is that you can use this stored-up family wisdom to help you live faithfully today. When you find yourself in Jonah-like situations, you aren't starting from scratch. As last Sunday's Scripture reading from 1 Cor. 10 put it, what happened to our fathers was written for our instruction.

Not only do we have the book of Jonah; we also have the rest of the OT, which tells us a lot more about what happened between God's people and Assyria after Jonah. Did Israel learn her lesson and repent like Nineveh? Did Nineveh maintain a repentant heart toward God, or did they take advantage of God's mercy and return to their evil ways? Did God ever bring justice against Nineveh? How should God's people respond when God blesses Gentiles and punishes His people? Is Jonah just a quirky story with some good moral lessons, or does it point to something bigger?

God's Word answers all of these questions, and so before we leave the book of Jonah, we're going to spend two more weeks looking at the legacy of Jonah in the Old and New testaments. First, we'll chart the history of Israel and Judah as it relates to Nineveh and to our lives, and next week, we'll look at what Jesus called *the sign of Jonah*, which will transition us into our commemoration of the three days and three nights that Jesus spent in the heart of the earth as He accomplished our salvation through His work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

Let's start with Israel. As I mentioned at the beginning of this series, Israel at this time is being led astray from God by King Jeroboam II. The verses mentioned in your bulletin are reminders that God has a plan for when His people go astray: when they chase other gods, God blesses other nations in order to make them jealous, so that they will return to Him. Jonah's mission to Nineveh is not only a testimony to God's overflowing mercy towards all of creation; it's also an object lesson for God's covenant people. Jonah initially misunderstands, and gets angry at God for turning away from His people, not realizing that *Israel* was actually the one turning away, and that God was trying to bring her back!

But as I read in 2 Kings 17:22-23, Jonah wasn't the only one to miss the point. Israel doesn't seem to have paid any attention to what God was doing, and they refused to depart from the Jeroboam-style sins that were separating them from God and His covenant blessings. Instead of learning wisdom from watching a city repent and humble themselves under God's word of warning, it *never occurs to them* that God will judge their sin, too. God speaks through this prophetic parable, but they don't listen.

And here's the lesson for us: when those moments come where we see the wicked enjoying blessing and prosperity and receiving mercy, that's our signal to pay attention! We ought to be running to God and asking why, not chasing after other gods so that we barely notice, and if we do notice, not acting like Jonah and assuming that *God* is being unfaithful to us, rather than reflecting on whether or not we're being faithful to Him!

But that's too abstract; here are some examples: how about a Christian mom who gets her priorities out of whack and pushes and pushes and pushes her little girls to look good, behave well, and get good grades, only to find that they don't like their mom, her standards, or her God? Then she meets an unbelieving mom who hasn't worked nearly as hard or sacrificed as much as she has, but this woman still gets on great with *her* daughters. That's the moment the Christian mom should drop her idols and run to Jesus, but all too often, that's the moment she decides that following Jesus doesn't really work and isn't worth it. God tries to provoke jealousy to heal our idolatry, and we get mad at Him and double down on our sin.

Or here's one in the life of the church: churches chase the idol of numbers by switching to entertainment-worship, where congregational singing is swapped out for a concert and Bible teaching gets replaced by 25 minute pop-culture filled pep talks. Then, when an unbelieving psychology professor gives two hour lectures on the book of Genesis and gets millions of viewers, the church is tempted to fuss at God for not blessing her with that kind of success when they should be repenting and returning to reverent worship.

When the world finds success and God's people stumble, God is trying to get our attention and call us back to Himself. That's how Jonah teaches us to understand the world. So don't chase after false gods, and then get angry at the true God. Repent, and come back!

So on the one hand, we have Israel not learning the right lesson, and on the other, we have Nineveh quickly forgetting her promises to turn away from evil. 2 Kings 17 describes a time probably less than a hundred years after Jonah. By now, Nineveh has become the capital city of Assyria; she's been blessed for some reason. But at this point, she's forgotten Israel's God and returned to her evil ways. 2 Kings 17:23 mentions stage two of God's plan for Israel – after she doesn't learn to be jealous, God removes her from the Promised Land and exiles her into where? *Assyria*. You can read more details in 2 Kings 17:1-8, but especially see v. 7: Israel is exiled because she has sinned against God.

Israel deserves to be judged and she's refusing to repent, and so God makes Assyria the rod of His anger. But while it's possible for a nation to righteously bring judgment against another nation, it's also possible to do the *right thing* in the *wrong way*, which is exactly what Nineveh does. When God uses man and they work together, the same action can be judged differently according to what each actor intended. We remember Joseph saying to his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

God says something very similar in Isaiah 10:5ff about Nineveh, "Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!" Assyria is doing God's work, but they're sinning in the process. "I'm sending them against the godless to execute my wrath," God says, "But that's not what *they* intend. In their hearts, they see themselves as gods, raining down destruction through their own power, for their own glory."

And we can apply this at a high level to just war theory, and all the way down the line to parental discipline: God might want little junior's sin punished, and He's appointed you to do it, but when you do it in the wrong way, your sin becomes even worse than the sin you were correcting. God has been gentle in His correction of you, and shown you all sorts of mercy. If you then become a merciless parent, God will turn and judge you *without* mercy.

I'm combining points 2-3 on your outline as two sides of the same coin. God forgives Nineveh and then uses her to discipline His people and send them into exile, but Nineveh does this not because they want to serve God and honor His justice, but because they've returned to the same wickedness and evil that caused God to send Jonah in the first place!

Nineveh initially repented and was *spared* by God, and then given the chance to *serve* God, but instead she took advantage of mercy to serve herself, *destroying* God's people instead of *disciplining* them. She's being used as the *agent* of God's wrath, but because of the *way* she does it, she makes herself the *object* of God's wrath.

And so in Nahum, God reverses His initial judgment of mercy, and brings down a great and terrible justice on the heads of the Ninevites. That's really the whole book of Nahum: God's plan to judge and destroy the Ninevites because of how they mistreated His people. In Jonah's day, God's mercy was honestly given, and a whole generation was spared through repentance and faith. But when they turned away from repentance back to evil, God withdrew His mercy, just like Jesus talks about in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

And interestingly, Nahum helps us address a lingering concern from Jonah, because in Nahum 1:3, the prophet finishes the quote from Exodus 34 that Jonah used in Jonah 4:2. Not only is the Lord *gracious* and *merciful*; He is also *avenging* and *wrathful*; He will *by no means* clear the guilty! We must not choose between a just God and a merciful God, a gracious God and a wrathful God. The One True God is *both*, and not because He has a split personality or can't make up His mind, but because He is perfectly just and perfectly merciful in every way and at every moment!

Jonah was worried that God's mercy meant that Nineveh was off the hook, free to go and sin up a storm, but Nahum completes the picture with the truth from Exodus that God punishes sin, and *will not* clear the guilty. No one in the history of Nineveh who trusts in the mercy of God will perish, but no Ninevite who rejects God's mercy and turns to evil will ever escape His perfect justice. Some get mercy, some get justice, but contrary to what Jonah implied, there is never any *injustice* with God.

So often, when we don't see justice today, we grow impatient and we blame God, like Jonah, instead of waiting patiently and trustingly at the feet of the God who knows best, a God of abundant mercy *and* righteous vengeance, the judge of all the earth who always and only does what is right. So read Jonah for mercy and Nahum for justice, and like Paul does in 2 Thessalonians 1, trust and worship the God who is both merciful and just.

Now we turn back from Nineveh to God's people. In the later part of the OT, God's covenant people split into two groups, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Through their histories, they become case studies in obeying God, especially in relation to Assyria. And this is where we see that even though the book of Jonah is not *just* a parable, it most certainly *is* a parable.

When God's people turn away from God to the gods of the nations, they flee like Jonah out onto the Gentile seas. Removed from God's protection, and actually under God's judgment, the waters/nations overcome them, and they sink down to the gates of Sheol. But God has appointed Assyria to swallow His people like a whale, so that instead of being completely slaughtered and erased from the world, they are preserved in exile so that they can be spat back out onto dry land when they turn back to God. This is part of why Jonah was sent in the first place: he went to prepare Nineveh to be a good host whale for Israel. God had a special place for them in His covenant purposes, a role that would include great blessings for Nineveh.

This helps us get a sense of both Israel's sin and Nineveh's sin. When Israel was in the whale, she ought to have turned back to God from her idolatry. When Nineveh held Israel in her womb, she should have been protecting her, not devouring her. But Israel refused to repent, and we never hear of a return from exile for the Northern kingdom; she's absorbed into the whale. And Nineveh does not provide Israel with safety and never spits her back out.

And just like *Israel* should have watched *Jonah's* interaction with Nineveh and repented without ever having to be thrown into the sea and swallowed, *Judah* ought to have been paying attention to *Israel's* fate, and learning to repent from what happened to Israel (this is what we see in several terrible passages in the book of Ezekiel).

But just like Jonah, just like Israel, Judah is too stubborn to repent, and has to learn the hard way. In the intervening years, Nineveh has been judged like Nahum said, and now another Assyrian province, Babylon, has become the monster. This is what we read about in Jeremiah 51, the clearest explanation of how Jonah serves as a parable. The sea of Gentiles nations is battering Judah, and then Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon swallows Judah like a monster (2 Kings 24-25).

But in the stomach of the whale, in Babylonian exile, God preserves His people. He brings blessing to Babylon through their witness, and prepares to return the faithful repentant remnant home (That's the book of Daniel). As Jer. 51:44-45 promises, God will punish Babylon and take what he has swallowed out of his mouth. And so in Ezra 1:1-7, after Cyrus the Persian punishes Bel-shazzar, he issues a decree that honors Yahweh, the God of Israel, and spits the Jews of the Southern Kingdom back into Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and worship God rightly once again.

So when the wicked receive mercy, and when God's people undergo judgment and discipline, remember that God has not been unfaithful to you; your sin and idolatry have cast you into the sea. Do not grumble or grow angry at God! Expect God to appoint a merciful whale to swallow you, and turn back to Him in repentance and in expectant faith. While you are in the belly of the whale, wait patiently and trustingly for perfect justice to be done, and for gracious mercy to abound.

This is the bigger picture of Jonah, the backdrop to the *sign* of Jonah that we will look at next week: a pattern of jealousy and repentance, justice and mercy, exile and return, death and resurrection that will receive its ultimate fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was cast onto the raging Roman-Gentile sea bearing our sins, was swallowed by the grave, and who rose again on the third day to reconcile us and bring us back to the God we are so quick to forget, but who always remembers us and saves us because of His great mercy. This is Jonah's story, and this is the story of your salvation. Let us give thanks to God,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*